

“LIVE BETTER WHERE YOU ARE”: HOME IMPROVEMENT AND THE
RHETORIC OF RENEWAL IN THE POSTWAR UNITED STATES

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“LIVE BETTER WHERE YOU ARE”: HOME IMPROVEMENT AND THE
RHETORIC OF RENEWAL IN THE POSTWAR UNITED STATES

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While sinuous rows of new suburban ramblers remain the predominant symbol of post-World War II housing in the United States, the upgrading of existing homes was an equally essential component of the era’s popular and building culture. Businesses, government agencies, academia, mass media, designers, and homeowners promoted postwar home improvement—sometimes in collaboration, often in competition for market share, consumer dollars, and professional authority. Negotiating realignments of expertise, these groups saw renewal as a national imperative, a moral virtue, and social reward. They reinterpreted traditional notions of the home as symbol of stability and security, not through timeless permanence but through perpetual change.

This study examines residential architecture as a temporal space, repeatedly reconfigured as a vehicle for self-expression and in response to shifting cultural priorities. It argues that home improvement, marketed and advertised, embraced and co-opted, drew rhetorical potency from established American attitudes toward personal reinvention and a privileging of the new. The dissertation does not attempt to offer a complete history of postwar home improvement. Rather, it identifies specific

episodes and interpretive lenses that offer insights into the depth and breadth of postwar remodeling activities and the ways in which a nation's culture can provide a rhetorical foundation for reshaping its built environment.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chad Garrett Randl earned a Bachelors of Arts in History from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1991. In 2000 he received his Master of Arts in Historic Preservation Planning from the Department of City and Regional Planning, College of Architecture, Art, and Planning at Cornell University. Also in 2000 he began work as an architectural historian with Heritage Preservation Services at the National Park Service's Center for Cultural Resources in Washington, DC. In 2004 he published his first book, *A-frame* with Princeton Architectural Press. He returned to Cornell University in 2007 to pursue a doctorate. The following year Princeton Architectural Press published his second book, *Revolving Architecture: A History of Buildings That Rotate, Swivel, and Pivot*. He earned a Ph.D. in the History of Architecture and Urbanism in the Department of Architecture, College of Architecture, Art, and Planning at Cornell University in 2014.

For Meli, Lucy, Ellie, and Laney

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This dissertation began long before I returned to school to attend the doctoral program at Cornell. I first became interested in processes of architectural change as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1990s Poland when I assisted with the conversion of a Renaissance palace from its previous use as a technical school into a municipally owned hotel and restaurant. Graduate work in historic preservation and seven years as a National Park Service architectural historian further interested me in how buildings are altered and the role culture plays in these transformations. At NPS I benefitted from the guidance of Charles E. Fisher, who remains a trusted sounding board for my interpretations of historical change. Also at NPS I found encouragement among colleagues at the Historic American Building Survey, including Jamie Jacobs, Lisa Davidson, Catherine Lavoie, and Virginia Price.

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first shared my investigation of early postwar home improvement outlets at the Vernacular Architecture Forum 2012 annual meeting in Madison, Wisconsin in a session chaired by Kristin Szylvian. Also in 2012, I spoke about miniature kitchen planning kits at the Cornell conference “The Language of Food,” organized by Diana Garvin. A paper on the same topic has been accepted for publication in the journal *Buildings and Landscapes*, where the insightful comments by anonymous peer reviewers and journal editors Marta Gutman and Cynthia Falk greatly improved and focused my interpretation.

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INTRODUCTION

"People are inspired to action by the desire for home improvement. They want to step up, to think up, to live up, to have more attractive surroundings."
– Myrna Johnston, Foods and Equipment Editor, *Better Homes & Gardens*, 1955¹

Americans have always seen themselves as restlessly determined to improve. Some traced the quest for betterment to the myth of a frontier wilderness to be civilized and made livable. Some saw it as an insatiable need for change that was endemic to the American experience. A citizen speaking with the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville during his 1830s travels through the young Republic, said, "There is a feeling among us about everything which prevents us aiming at permanence; there reigns in America a popular and universal belief in the progress of the human spirit. We are always expecting an improvement to be found in everything."² Improvement was a personal act of transformation—the betterment of one's character, education, and capabilities.³ But it was also articulated physically in the places where people lived. Whether through hard work or a lucky break most Americans craved a better (and typically bigger) home. When resources allowed, improvement often meant an entirely new

¹ Myrna Johnston, "What's Going on at Home? . . . What It Means in Housewares," *Hardware Age*, (January 6, 1955): 120.

² Quoted in: B. Joseph Pine II and Stan Davis, *Mass Customization: The New Frontier in Business Competition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 14.

³ In the late 1800s home improvement referred to this more general elevating of the entire domestic environment as a means of raising the occupants within. Home improvement clubs sprung up across the country, encouraging women to "make their homes comfortable and happy to the end that the said homes may be attractive to their husbands and conducive to the health and future prospects of their children." "A Club of Home Makers: Women Propose to Learn How to Attract Their Husbands," *New York Times*, March 12, 1899, 4. Music lessons, bible study, and guidance on hygiene, manners, and social graces were all considered home improvement. Although its meaning evolved in the twentieth century to refer primarily to physical remodelings, the moral component of home improvement and its connection to obligation was not lost.

home in a new place. Homesteaders from the Colonial era through the nineteenth century built impermanent dwellings fully expecting to move on to larger, stronger, and more aesthetically pleasing structures as resources allowed.⁴ In 1848 Andrew Jackson Downing saw signs that American residential architecture would rise “above the platform of mere animal wants” and that Americans would “perceive the intellectual superiority of a beautiful design” that served as “an expression of the intelligent life of man, in a state of society where the soul, the intellect, and the heart, architecture all awake, and all educated.” Such expectation contributed to the development of the nineteenth and twentieth century suburb, where stylish new houses on spacious, verdant lots seemed to many an unquestionable improvement over life in an overcrowded city or the vernacular house forms that Downing called “an unmeaning pile of wood or stone.”⁵ Forsaking the old in favor of the new (and better) was a theme of post-World War II television programs in which prosperous families served as aspirational models for viewers—the Clampetts moved to Beverly Hills and the Jeffersons ascended to a “deluxe apartment in the sky.”⁶

Many Americans chose to improve their dwellings rather than build or move to new ones. Contrary to common representations of the home as a bulwark of stability and tradition, owners repeatedly made alterations when they had the opportunity—to

⁴ Cary Carson, Norman F. Barka, William M. Kelso, Gary Wheeler Stone, and Dell Upton. “Impermanent Architecture in the Southern American Colonies,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 16, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn): 135-196. For Thomas Jefferson’s concerns over impermanent dwellings in Virginia and what Jefferson saw as their danger to the stable development of democracy, see: Duncan Faherty, *Remodeling the Nation: The Architecture of American Identity 1776-1858* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), 24.

⁵ Andrew Jackson Downing, “On the Moral Influences of Good Houses,” in Andrew Jackson Downing, *Andrew Jackson Downing: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012).

⁶ *The Beverly Hillbillies* aired on CBS between 1962 and 1971. The situation comedy featured the Clampett family’s adventures adapting to wealth and urbane life after striking oil on their rural farm and relocating to Southern California. CBS broadcast *The Jeffersons* between 1975 and 1985. It was a spinoff of *All in the Family* about the Bunkers’ neighbors, George and Louise Jefferson, an African-American couple who moved from Queens to Manhattan following the success of George’s dry cleaning business.

assume the latest style or to incorporate new technologies.⁷ With the addition of a few modest features—a frieze and some gable end returns—Federal houses of the early Republic period could become newly fashionable Greek Revival homes. Owners of Italianate homes later added Mansard roofs inspired by Second Empire fashion.⁸ Old homes got indoor bathrooms, larger windows, gas lighting, and electricity. Porches were added, later expanded into wrap-around verandas, and eventually removed again as successive generations demonstrated changing tastes and attitudes toward nature and community...or they simply got tired of maintenance. During the Great Depression and the World War that followed, modest home improvement was in keeping with economic conditions and a cultural focus on thriftiness.

While sinuous rows of new suburban ranch houses remain a predominant symbol of post-World War II prosperity in the United States, the upgrading of existing homes was an equally important marker of the era's economic expansion, building culture, and popular conceptions of success. For more than two decades, millions of owners had deferred substantial work on their homes. A sizeable percentage were still heated with coal and lacked indoor plumbing, especially in rural regions. Improvement of these structures was a national imperative. A postwar economic boom that included a vast expansion of middle class homeowners meant that remodeling would likely have occurred at this time without prompting. Yet a diverse group of building product manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, and salesmen, accompanied by magazine

⁷ Owners who undertook remodeling work did not necessarily do so out of an ideological determination to reuse or adapt. If money was scarce, improvements substituted for the purchase of a new home. For a discussion of this point, see: Thomas Hubka and Judith C. Kenny, "Examining the American Dream: Housing Standards and the Emergence of a National Housing Culture, 1900-1930," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 13, no. 1 (2006): 49-69.

⁸ The editors of *House and Garden* cautioned that such superficial changes could have deleterious effects on a house's appearance if undertaken without regard for its original character. They stated that "The changed building must radiate the spirit of the original. Its new ornamentation and detail should not be anachronisms." "Editorial: The Remodeled House," *House and Garden* (June 1912): 46.

editors, trade journalists, and advertising copywriters worked to ensure homeowners directed as much investment as possible toward home improvement. They argued for reworking not only deteriorated, worn out homes, but those that were completely functional and those that were only recently built. They instilled dissatisfaction among homeowners and concerns that what they had was not what they needed, desired, or deserved.⁹

Pairing deeply rooted cultural themes with new postwar anxieties, remodeling boosters played on characterizations of the home as an expression of individual taste and achievement, social conformity, moral rectitude, and national security.

Advertisements touted the purported advantages of renovation—the durability of aluminum siding, the contemporary appearance of new kitchen cabinets, the spaciousness of a finished basement—while deriding as "old fashioned" or "worn out" the features of decades past. Mass-market magazines joined forces with building material firms and threw their editorial weight behind innovation. U.S. government initiatives encouraged detached-home modernization to ameliorate ongoing housing shortages, support the building industry, and showcase American capitalism and individualism. Consistent throughout was the ennobling of the new, the allure of the bargain, and the articulation of status through consumption

Postwar home improvement was prompted by cultural and demographic shifts and technological innovations, several of which—expanding households, Cold War competition, growing consumer autonomy and integration with a national sales infrastructure—are central to this dissertation. Others changes were no less important.

⁹ Economist John Kenneth Galbraith criticized this sort of “want creation” in his 1958 book *The Affluent Society*. A year before, author Vance Packard published *The Hidden Persuaders*, a scathing critique of motivational researchers and consumer manipulation. See: Vance Oakley Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: D. McKay Company, 1974) and John Kenneth Galbraith and Alan Crook, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

The increase of television ownership and its dominance of personal and familial entertainment, for example, had Americans scrambling to integrate sets into the domestic interior. TV reshaped living and dining rooms and prompted the creation of new furnishings such as integrated wall cabinets. It also helped popularize recreation rooms and other play spaces.¹⁰ Depictions of modern interiors on early television sitcoms surely influenced consumer demand for similar layouts and furnishings. Open plans, which accommodated the technical imperatives of filming before a live studio audience, were prominent features of postwar situation comedies and family dramas.

A West Coast inspired move toward informal, outdoor living prompted national interest in backyard porches and patios connected to interiors through glass doors.¹¹ Improvements that the owners of existing homes saw in the new suburban homes being built by the tens of thousands also influenced remodeling practices. Homeowners visited model houses or viewed their representations in ads and articles and wanted to integrate into their own dwellings the built-ins, merged kitchen and living areas, the breakfast nooks and snack bars they saw in new construction. Postwar

¹⁰ Interior designers such as Victoria Kloss Ball provided guidance for professionals and homeowners about how to fit the television into the postwar home. "Many households prefer to place this sort of equipment in a more secluded room such as a family entertainment room nearby. Often a television set is mounted on a turntable chassis so that it may be pivoted to either room. As has been mentioned, some households have made television viewing an accompaniment to dining and have altered their entire dining area to accommodate the set. A view from the kitchen and dinette is frequently demanded by the small fry (to say nothing of the oldsters) who must see their favorite program from this source. Personal solutions such as bedroom placement are also used." Victoria Kloss Ball, *The Art of Interior Design: A Text in the Aesthetics of Interior Design* (New York: MacMillian, 1960), 64. The definitive study of television's postwar cultural dominance, including its spatial impact upon American homes, is: Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹¹ Instrumental in this development were television depictions of California living, and mass-market magazines, especially *Sunset*, which packaged an idealized image of the West Coast as an embodiment of modern America. The magazine was long interested in architectural expressions of this idea. From 1957, it partnered with American Institute of Architects to offer awards. Cissie Dore Hill writes, "'Breaking open the box' and 'bringing the outside inside' became the bywords as western architecture took on the special character that came from its ranch house heritage and western climate." Cissie Dore Hill, "Sunset: A Century of Western Living 1898-1998," *California History* 78, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 94-97.

homeowners frequently replaced double-hung sash with picture windows of the types found in Levittown and other suburban developments. Thus while processes of home improvement are not unique to the postwar United States, the particular nature and extent of the American market, its character and modes of operation were distinctly American.

This work offers a discursive analysis of home improvement promotion during the two-decade period beginning in 1945. In examining the make up of these appeals—in print, in store windows and aisles, in films and television programs, and on the homeowner’s doorstep—it connects their rhetorical strategies to broader cultural trends in play at the time. Tracing the evolution of sales displays and the language of the sales pitch it identifies how promoters presented remodeling as a national imperative, a moral obligation, and a social reward. In essence, it is a study of how communication and the exchange of ideas between webs of actors contributed to a reshaping of the postwar built landscape, and how ideas—expressed, pushed, and reinterpreted by their recipients—impact domestic space on a national scale.

Home Improvement Defined

This study examines the rhetoric surrounding substantial improvements proposed for the interior or exterior of the single-family home, work that William Nash called contract remodeling. According to Nash, "contract remodeling usually takes place when homeowners feel their houses have deteriorated or become obsolete to the point where remodeling is needed to preserve the economic and social value."¹² "Home improvement" encompassed myriad projects large and small. "Remodeling" often referred to the complete remaking an exterior or at least one interior room, focusing on

¹² Middle income according to Nash was those families earning between \$3,500 and \$7,000 per year. Nash, *Residential Rehabilitation*, 48.

stylistic changes intended to make the old house look new. Because postwar promoters and homeowners typically used the terms interchangeably during this period, I have done likewise.¹³ Advertisers promised that modest home upgrades required no more than a trip to the store, a screwdriver, and few hours of work (Figure 0.1). For those seeking improvement on the cheap, hardware dealers stocked wrought iron railings and columns for stoops, porches, and balconies that could provide a relatively inexpensive and fast change to the home exterior.¹⁴ Inside, home improvement could include the installation of basic combination cabinet/sink units costing less than \$100. Perhaps most common was the finishing of basement and attic spaces intentionally left unfinished when the house was new to keep the initial sales price down and allow the potential for later expansion.¹⁵ Manufacturers and dealers promoted their products as being able to cover over existing finishes with little or no surface preparation. Siding could go right over old clapboard; interior wallboards could be screwed into existing

¹³ Homeowners and promoters expected that both improvement and remodeling projects would increase a home's value and comfort, as well as effect a change of appearance and style. In these ways, such projects differed from maintenance and repair work. Maintenance suggested a regular process of intervention to ensure the features and materials of the house did not deteriorate and to replace those elements that demonstrated wear. Repair addressed issues of deterioration in an effort to return the home or its various features to a state prior to that deterioration. Both maintenance and repair preserve the value and condition of a house. They are not intended to address issue of stylistic change or to upgrade a home to conditions that never existed in the past. In fact, they are meant to retain the house in a condition of stasis and status quo. Industry and governmental campaigns to encourage and facilitate consumer maintenance and repair usually accompanied times of economic austerity and military mobilization. During the Depression and World War II, political, educational, and business leaders encouraged homeowners to make do and to extend the life of their home and forestall major interventions the resources for which did not exist at the time.

¹⁴ With adjustable fittings and ornamental scrolls and spiraled rails, these features provided a quick and affordable means of updating a home's facade. They were especially attractive to homeowners with sagging and deteriorating wood porch balustrades and columns.

¹⁵ The distinction being that shell houses were generally uninhabitable until after substantial work was completed. Homes with unfinished basements and/or attics were fit for occupation. Depending on their owners, unfinished spaces might never be used for anything beyond storage. Barbara Kelly's study of how attic spaces were finished in Levittown houses confirms the practice as a crucial segment of home improvement. Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (New York: State University of New York, 1993).

(and often deteriorating) plaster finishes, and new latex paints could cover old wallpaper in a single coat. Such rhetoric made projects appear less intimidating, more affordable, and seemingly instantaneous.

Kitchen conversions and siding installations were popular throughout the United States. However, variations in economic development, climate, local traditions, and local building markets, meant considerable variation in how home improvement was defined and executed from place to place. Owners in colder parts of the country built mudrooms, enclosed porches, and finished attics with insulation. Such alterations were increasingly categorized as “winterization,” a sales pitch borrowed from the auto industry.¹⁶ New glass jalousie windows, carports, and patios were especially popular in warmer regions. Areas where slab-on-grade foundations were more common, especially the southeast and southwest, obviously saw fewer basement conversions. Just like consumer power tools, convenience foods and television, the development and marketing of appliances, or “white goods,” went hand in hand with home modernization. They were central to electrification campaigns that were especially prominent in the first half of the century.¹⁷ In the postwar era, dealers used new stoves, toilets, and sofa sets as gateways to up-sell larger remodeling projects. But the simple purchase of a new refrigerator or dining set did not generally constitute home

¹⁶ Dwight L. Bolinger, “Among the New Words,” *American Speech*, 16, No. 2 (April 1941): 148.

¹⁷ Carolyn M. Goldstein, “From Service to Sales: Home Economics in Light and Power, 1920-1940,” *Technology and Culture* 38, no. 1 (1997): 121-152. For other studies involving appliances and the evolution of the twentieth century house, see: Christine Kleinegger, “Out of the Barns and Into the Kitchens: Transformations in Farm Women's Work in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” in *Women, Work, and Technology*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), Ruth Schwartz Cowan. *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), and Sandy Isenstadt, “Visions of Plenty: Refrigerators in America Around 1950,” *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 4 (1998): 311-321.

improvement, thus the promotion of appliances, fixture, and furnishings for individual sale is beyond the scope of this study. Also outside the study's scope is "owner-building," in which individuals constructed their own homes either from scratch or using exterior shell kits. Richard Harris sees these projects making a consumer market visible to building material manufacturers and dealers, thus contributing to the emergence of both a DIY culture and a mature home improvement industry by the 1950s.¹⁸

Renovation projects that landlords undertook in order to charge higher rents and appeal to a more distinguished class of tenants fall outside the boundaries of this investigation. Although motivated by similar ideals of regeneration seen in residential remodeling, the speculative, large-scale work of private developers, corporations, and non-profits were not represented in the persuasive stream directed toward homeowners and are therefore excluded from this study.¹⁹ What William Nash calls "prestige rehabilitation," high end remodeling and rehabilitation activity in neighborhoods like Georgetown in Washington DC and Greenwich Village in Manhattan, is similarly excluded.²⁰ While middle class home improvement and prestige work shared some

¹⁸ While I do not dispute Harris' claim that these building forms spurred a consumer market for building materials, the rhetoric that is the focus of this work was directed specifically at existing homeowners rather than aspiring owners. Richard Harris, *Building a Market: The Rise of the Home Improvement Industry, 1914-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Some projects, for example the U.S. Gypsum Company's redevelopment of New York City tenements, were intended to serve as model showcases for improving marginal housing, and argue in favor of rehabilitation over large scale clearance. This type of work was summarized in the contemporary book *Operative Remodeling*. Published by the U.S. Gypsum Company in 1956, it encouraged builders to undertake speculative remodeling projects. *Operative Remodeling: The New Profit Frontier for Builders* (Chicago: United States Gypsum Company, 1956). For other coverage of the company's work, see: J. McAllister, "U.S. Gypsum's East Harlem Homework," *Sales Management* 95 (December 17, 1965): 29-30, "Gold in Slums: U.S. Gypsum Hopes to Find Profit in Slum Rehabilitation," *Engineering News-Record* 175 (December 2, 1965): 21, and "Industry Builds a Showcase in the Slums," *Business Week* (February 26, 1966): 40-41.

²⁰ William W. Nash, *Residential Rehabilitation: Private Profits and Public Purposes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 8.

cultural motivations—status, engagement with a national patriotic movement—there were also profound differences. Influenced by the nascent historic preservation movement the changes initiated by prestige projects were not typical improvements, but reversals of past alterations deemed inconsistent with a building’s historic character. Rehabilitation ran counter to the past trend of introducing new style, new look (even if revivalist) when altering a house. The goal with rehabilitation was to return to an earlier form, to reassert an earlier aesthetic; it was a negation of the present, or rather an embrace of a present that preferred the past. The new goal was not to obliterate or conceal the past, but to reclaim it.²¹

The Postwar Era Defined

In a sense, this dissertation picks up a story that started years earlier.²² The remodeling market discussed in the following chapters began in the first decades of the twentieth century, accelerated during the Depression era, and took off to unprecedented heights in the 1950s and 60s. The interwar period saw hardware, lumber, and plumbing associations beginning to move away from a concentration on the wholesale and professional building market.²³ In time they saw homeowners not as irrelevant, or to

²¹ For a brief discussion of the intersection between home improvement and historic preservation, see the final chapter “Love Affair With the Past,” in Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in 20th Century America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).

²² This study is less about first examples of various practices, and the birth of home improvement activities. Instead, I strive to understand how these practices of persuasion were filtered through, modified, and given new potency by cultural currents that typified the postwar era.

²³ Interwar improvements were often of a different nature than postwar remodeling projects. The former often involved the introduction of up-to-date utilities and technologies such as electricity, gas, oil, or electric furnaces, and indoor plumbing. Appliance and electric trade organizations pushed these types of improvements, establishing such initiatives as the National Kitchen Modernization Bureau. The NKMB, affiliated with the Edison Electric Institute in NY, promoted kitchen remodeling and with it electrification and appliance consumption. During the Depression, improvement more often than not meant urgently needed repairs, adaption of single-family homes to accept relatives or boarders, and bank-funded upgrades to facilitate foreclosure sales. Regularly, these interventions were pitched as essential work and contrasted to indulgences such as the automobile. By the 1950s many of these projects were complete and remodeling, motivated by other factors, focused on spatial expansion and stylistic change. While still presented as essential needs (to accommodate the physical and mental needs

be grudgingly tolerated, but as primary and indispensable customers. Janet Hutchison has argued that this formulation of a retail remodeling market occurred in the latter 1920s. Richard Harris says that cooperation between manufacturers and retailers to target consumers did not occur until the eve of World War II.²⁴ I would agree that the turn to consumers was far from complete by the postwar era. In fact, in many areas the process had barely begun. Trade journal articles throughout the latter 1940s and the 1950s confirm the nascent nature of consumer home improvement marketing. Manufacturers argued that retailers were not doing nearly enough to entice homeowners. Store operators, in turn, complained that producers were hobbling the transition to retail with unresponsiveness to consumer demand and unattractive, unhelpful packaging. But in the years before 1945 there were some lumber and hardware outlets that diversified to form building supply centers and home stores, there were retailers and manufacturers who targeted women shoppers. And there were customer and do-it-yourself-focused showrooms. What was missing was an unprecedented economic expansion coupled with several overarching cultural themes that made home improvement a central element of postwar consumer America.

The remodeling market expanded rapidly in the first decade after 1945 and growth accelerated even more in the early 1950s, with the end of the Korean War and associated building material shortages. In 1956 expenditures rose to \$16.5 billion, over a billion more than in the previous year. Increasingly aware of consumer demand, and ever mindful of the new construction market's cyclical nature, building material manufacturers, dealers, and contractors turned to remodeling as an area of potentially

of growing families), they were also presented as just deserts, rewards for a nation that had hard won prosperity.

²⁴ Harris, *Building a Market*, 161, 186.

sustained (and sustaining) growth (Figure 0.4).²⁵ They sought what the trade journal *American Lumberman and Building Products Merchandiser* called "the boom without the morning-after headache" and what the Council of Economic Advisors called "stable prosperity."²⁶

The rising interest in remodeling had many motivating factors. For twenty years, the Great Depression and World War II had diverted personal investment and governmental attention away from domestic building, maintenance, and upgrading. Wartime technological advances and postwar industrial retooling created new products and materials that required new markets. Ongoing housing shortages meant demand for even marginal homes that could be fixed up and expanded.²⁷ Owners of these older homes wanted to match new homes in style and features. Remodeling promoters targeted relatively new houses as well. In the mid-1950s over one quarter of the total housing inventory was less than a decade old. Unwilling to write off this potentially lucrative market, promoters directed their pitches at the owners of recently constructed suburban homes, where families were expanding and aging, and where incomes were

²⁵ Like the postwar building industry, the postwar American economy was not one of uninterrupted and ascendant prosperity. There was considerable economic volatility and turbulence as markets adjusted to postwar economy, as factories retooled, and as another war appeared. Recessions occurred in 1949, 1953, 1958, and 1960-71. The outbreak of the Korean War (1950-1953) imposed new material restrictions and uncertainty into the market. Homebuilders who specialized in one off dwellings for the well to do before the war were unable to address the critical housing shortages of the first postwar decade. For contemporary coverage of the housing crisis and the inability of home builders to meet the demand, see: "Fortune Survey," *Fortune*, no. 33 (1946): 266, and *Ibid*.

The building industry as well as other industry trade journals commonly featured discussions in the early 1950s of a shift from the wartime seller's market to a postwar buyer's market that would see increased competitiveness among building product merchants and other merchandisers. These concerns prompted calls for greater efficiencies, more market research, controlling expenses, and above all, progressive, creative selling of home improvement to consumers.

²⁶ "Washington Calendar," *American Lumberman and Building Products Merchandiser* (July 1, 1950): 20. Henceforth, the journal will be referred to as *American Lumberman*.

²⁷ Rapid demobilization among other factors pushed vacancy rates in nonfarm areas down to 1.4 percent in November 1945. Mason C. Doan, *American Housing Production, 1880-2000: A Concise History* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997), 53.

increasing.²⁸ Indeed, consumer-homeowners had more money to spend and more time to spend it in the postwar era. Between 1936 and 1950, the U.S. Department of Commerce recorded a doubling of aggregate personal real income and a fifty percent increase in the average personal real income per household.²⁹

The period between 1945 and the late 1960s was one of great cultural change and tumult in American society. Citizens and institutions were reconsidering the meanings of patriotism, individuality, the family, and duty. It was a time when expectations for what Americans' had a right to—fulfillment, happiness, privacy—were being recalibrated and often expressed in material and spatial terms—an updated exterior, a new bathroom, a recreation room. It was a time when Americans' sense of self, viewed internally and externally, was open to reinvention. Additionally, changes in style accelerated during this period. Color palettes came and went, patterns and the contours of furnishings and equipment changed with increasing rapidity as the building product industry attempted to adopt the practices of model years and customization from the automobile industry.³⁰

²⁸ Half of all housing in the United States in 1956 had been built after 1930. Housing and Home Finance Agency, *Housing in the United States: A Graphic Presentation* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956), 22.

The power of new products skillfully presented could be remarkably persuasive. As a Crane Company advertisement noted, "Even customers who are satisfied with their present bathrooms and kitchens, begin to think about remodeling when they leaf through the new Crane Sketchbook of Ideas."

The ad showed a salesman and female prospect at a sales installation called the Crane Idea Center that has slots for brochures and booklets and a raked desktop that resembled the professional designer's drafting table. "Dealer Gets Good Remodeling Jobs Through Crane Sketchbook of Ideas," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1952): 227.

²⁹ Selma Goldsmith et al, "Size Distribution of Income Since the Mid-Thirties," *Review of Economics and Statistics* (February 1954): 1-32.

³⁰ In fact, the home improvement industry admired and loathed the automobile. They deplored the way American willingness to spend on cars ate into disposable income that they felt should go toward the home. They loved the systems of marketing and selling that they felt car manufacturers got right—creation of perceived obsolescence, personalization through option selection, a focus on modernity and speed of change. An American culture increasingly reliant upon the car shaped the home improvement market directly and indirectly. Spread out suburban land use dictated where new remodeling stores would be located (along arteries on town outskirts, in shopping centers), how their lots would be organized (prominent facades with large display windows, ample parking), and enabled owners to pick up materials themselves rather than arrange delivery. Car culture also freed younger Americans from

The model home improvement projects published in advertisements, brochures, and articles during this period often exhibited a playful and indulgent modernity. In part this reflected the influence of West Coast lifestyle ideals that dominated postwar popular culture. There was a focus on individuality and personal fulfillment, modestly aspirational and laced with thematic escapism—more Morris Lapidus than Mies van der Rohe. Alice Friedman describes how this populist glamor was an essential component of postwar modernism. Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal in New York, Lapidus' Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami were fantasy spaces where everyday Americans could perform as characters in a film or play, trading daily life for a sensory-rich spectacle.³¹

Promoted home improvement projects translated these ideas to a middle class domestic scale, unfinished attics and basements became recreation rooms loosely inspired by celebrity homes (featured in *Life* magazine) and movie sets. Homeowners converted concrete floors and cinder block walls to paneled bars and tiled dance floors with minimal effort or expense. Master bedrooms with sitting areas exhibited a sort of everyday ostentation even if their ostensible goal was to provide a refuge from growing children. The removal of non-loadbearing partitions on the ground floor, the opening of kitchen to dining room replicated the flowing contemporary spaces of new homes featured in television sitcoms and *Sunset* magazine.

Residential remodeling gained importance during the postwar period in part because of an emphatic reassertion of the single-family home as a symbol of security, privacy, and individualism. At the same time, houses took on additional functions as entertainment centers and bomb shelters. Homeowners sought to reconfigure their

their parents' watchful eyes, instilling consternation on the latter's part that contributed to a desire for recreation rooms, pools and patios and other teen-friendly spaces that kept kids contentedly nearby.

³¹ Alice T. Friedman, *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

dwelling to align with these changing cultural definitions. One trade magazine told its contractor-readers, "As a result of television and other factors, the trend of American life is 'back to the home.' 'Stay-at-home' people take more pride in their homes and are willing to spend more money on them."³²

Renewal was a byword of the early postwar era. America had emerged from the war victorious, powerful, and influential, but its physical infrastructure, housing stock, and consumer culture looked dated. Clothing, cars, food, and dwellings were all targets for remodeling. Even that ultimate symbol of political power, the White House, underwent an extensive, highly publicized renovation during the Truman administration (Figure 0.5).³³ Popular magazines also covered the renovation of Dwight Eisenhower and his style-setting wife Mamie's Pennsylvania farmhouse. Everyone seemed to be undertaking improvement projects, except those who rented, and those racial and ethnic minorities in cities and rural areas whose stories were almost universally excluded from mass media coverage and who were overlooked by those promoting remodeling.

Remodeling Promoters

A range of actors across the entire economy undertook the task of selling remodeling to others. Everyone produced something and almost every party sold and consumed on some level. Manufacturers made finished goods, but they also bought raw materials, market studies, and survey results. In journals and exhibitions manufacturers promoted their lines of steel cabinets, flooring, or paint. According to a U.S. Forest Service

³² "Remodeling! The Third Dimension of Your Market," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1953): 106.

³³ See, for example: "Brightening Up the White House: Rooms Will Get New Old Look," *Life* (November 5, 1951): 56-58., Bess Furman, "New-Old White House," *New York Times Magazine*, October 21, 1951, 24-27., and F. Gutheim, "Rebuilding the White House," *Architectural Record* 105 (June 1949): 116. As photos of a hollowed out shell confirm, the White House project was a heavy-handed reconstruction.

survey in 1961, almost 40% of dealers learned of new products from trade publications such as the *American Lumberman*, *Domestic Engineering*, and *Hardware Age*.³⁴ Manufacturers encouraged local dealers and contractors to go after remodeling projects even though they may seem less lucrative than new construction. They promised vigorous "preselling" campaigns (the process of introducing consumers to new products through advertisements) and marketing kits with sample advertising copy, letters for direct mailing, window signs, and store displays.³⁵ Dealers and contractors sold remodeling to homeowners, but they were also consumers themselves, purchasing finished building products, advertising space, and the expertise of marketing specialists and store designers.

Other groups similarly found it in their interests to stimulate home improvement consumption. Government and industry initiatives such as the changes in Title I Home Improvement loans and the Operation Home Improvement campaign ("1956 is the Year to Fix") stressed the importance of upgrading extant homes. Harry Truman, Joseph McCarthy and others pushed for robust private housing solutions like remodeling that could ease demands for government-provided public housing while increasing American Cold War readiness. Business organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and local chambers joined the chorus of those pushing homeowners to upgrade.

Expert advisors, in person and in print, added to the discourse on remodeling consumption. Magazines and newspapers published authoritative articles but they also

³⁴ Clark Row, "Changing Role of Retail Dealers in Lumber Marketing" U.S. Forest Service Research Paper SO-7 (New Orleans, LA: Southern Forest Experiment Station, Forest Service, USDA, 1964), 16.

³⁵ A 1958 *Printer's Ink* article suggests such a complicated network of interaction and persuasion, noting that Alcoa's strategy at the time was to persuade homeowners of the value and need for their materials in order to generate sales to manufacturers who would then produce new products made using those materials. "Alcoa Sells the Man Who Buys Houses and Cars to Sell to the Manufacturers," *Printer's Ink* (January 3, 1958): 43-44.

conducted surveys that probed their readers' desires and attitudes toward housing.³⁶ They sold the results to advertisers accompanied by the claim that their publication spoke to and on behalf their readership. The Good Housekeeping seal and *Consumer Reports* ratings provided homeowners supposedly impartial guidance on navigating an ever more complicated and crowded marketplace.³⁷ Postwar home economists sought to develop discerning consumers who could analyze the attributes and drawbacks of new products, sort out the competing claims of various manufacturers, and make informed decisions about which product or feature was best suited their needs, budget, and personality. Unlike Depression-Era home economic curricula that typically espoused repair and making do, postwar programs favored replacing old with new. Consumption, rather than conservation, was the rule.³⁸ Novel professions such as remodeling designers and kitchen specialists accompanied the coalescing home improvement market. Some were trained as architects or interior designers, others were self-taught or industry-trained salesmen refashioned as expert planners. All put themselves forward as appropriate mediators between building material producers and retailers, and the homeowner-consumer.

³⁶ For example, in 1957 *McCall's* magazine hosted the first Congress for Better Living in Washington, DC. The three day round-table event, attended by 100 women selected from 100,000 nationwide who had already completed a *McCall's* questionnaire, was intended to answer the question, "What do women really want in their homes of today and tomorrow?" "100 Housewives Speak Their Minds," *McCall's* (March 1958), 139-142, 144, 146. The magazine *Redbook*, undertook surveys and collaborations with mall merchants to encourage consumption. Their 1961 film "In the Suburbs," tied the magazine to suburbanization the "young adults" who inhabited them. It equated babies and home improvement, shopping centers and public space, and consumption with family and national vibrancy. It also presented the magazine as the professional authority young adults turned to for advice. *Redbook*, "In the Suburbs," 1961) MPEG2 copy of original film, https://archive.org/details/0736_In_the_Suburbs_01_00_57_00 (accessed Jan 14, 2013).

³⁷ *Consumer Reports* magazine subscriptions increased from 55,000 during World War II to 700,000 in 1954. Lizabeth Cohen describes how during the postwar period, the magazine, published by parent organization, Consumers Union, "became a fitting manual for purchasers as citizens who peopled the Consumers' Republic." Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 131.

³⁸ See: Amy Sue Bix, "Equipped for Life: Gendered Technical Training and Consumerism in Home Economics, 1920-1980," *Technology and Culture* 43, no. 4, Kitchen Technologies (2002): 728-754.

The emergent discipline of motivational research saw Ernest Dichter and other social scientists using Freudian theory and new techniques such as deep interviews and focus groups to identify consumer preferences and habits.³⁹ Dichter, an Austrian-born psychologist and self-appointed marketing guru, established the New York-based Institute for Motivational Research in 1946. The firm pitched its services to the Carpet Institute, Inc., the Red Cedar Shingle Bureau, the Wallpaper Council, and the Asbestos-Cement Products Association. It conducted in depth consumer research campaigns for clients including Youngstown Kitchens, Du Pont Paints, and the International Swimming Pool Corporation.⁴⁰ In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan presented Dichter as a sexist manipulator who promised American housewives emotional satisfaction and fulfillment through domestic consumption.⁴¹

The Complicated Consumer

Motivational psychologists, popular magazine editors, manufacturers and dealers all wanted to connect with and prompt to action the American homeowner. They appealed to consumers on a variety of social and economic levels, but the section of

³⁹ See: Harmut Berghoff, Philip Scranton, and Uwe Spiekermann. *The Rise of Marketing and Market Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and Stefan Schwartzkopf and Rainer Gries, *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research: New Perspectives on the Making of Post-war Consumer Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴⁰ Dichter was well aware of the multiple levels of consumption in the home improvement industry and targeted all of them when his company set out to understand buying decisions (and thus capitalize on motivations). Purchasing decisions that affected building product manufacturers were made not just by homeowners at the hardware store or lumberyard, but also by dealers, architects, builders, and remodeling contractors. Dichter's proposal for a study to promote sales of Youngstown Kitchens suggested that it was necessary to include these professionals in his investigation, and furthermore, that their decisions, just as with the homeowner, were based on a combination of logical factors and emotional factors. According to the proposal, "This conflict between the desire to appear rational and the need for psychological gratification, we have found, is not limited to consumers or to laymen in general. The decision to select or recommend certain materials for new or repair construction is also influenced by a similar conflict among architects and builders, and to a lesser degree among dealers." Ernest Dichter, "Proposal for a Motivational Research Study of the Sales and Advertising Problems of Youngstown Steel Kitchens and Youngstown Cabinet Sinks" (Croton-on-Hudson, New York: Institute for Motivational Research, Inc., May, 1956), 4.

⁴¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

the population they targeted most vigorously was what *Fortune* magazine called “the heart of the Changing American Market—the younger white-collar people in the \$4,000-to-\$7,500 income bracket.” It was a group identified by “the great forest of television aerals, the Buick Special Riviera hard-tops, the housewives in blue jeans and plaid slacks kaffeeklatsching on the lawns, the hundreds of husbands stopping off at the giant supermarket to pick up extra groceries on their way home from work.”⁴² This was the demographic slice that had buying power and an inclination to consume; younger than those who had lived long enough to feel content with existing arrangements, old enough to be settled in their own place and in a position to make their own identities.

A defining characteristic of the postwar economic boom was its expanding middle class. A separate *Fortune* study found it swelled by those who in the past would have been called working class. Sixty percent were workers, craftsman, and laborers of one type or another.⁴³ They were less inclined to save and more inclined to buy on credit than was the preceding generation scarred by the deprivations of the Great Depression. Two-fifths of the group achieved this level of status through the income of a second wage-earner (almost always the wife) working at least part-time outside of the home. Newcomers to the middle class, they were especially attuned to

⁴² William H. Whyte, “The Web of Word of Mouth,” *Fortune* 50 (November 1954): 142. Another study found that those making \$3,000 or more per year purchased 80 percent of all home furnishings in 1950. *Time Research Report* #1055, February 1950, cited in: F. W. Gilchrist, “The Discount House,” *Journal of Marketing* (July 1952): 267. Established in 1930, *Fortune* magazine represented publisher Henry R. Luce’s desire to more closely ally the American business community with American society under an umbrella of ‘corporate liberalism. Glossy and rich in advertising, the magazine addressed contemporary cultural issues and trends, in the postwar era devoting considerable attention to consumerism and suburbanization. For *Fortune*’s early history, see: Michael Augspurger, *An Economy of Abundant Beauty: Fortune Magazine and Depression America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). William Hollingsworth Whyte was a leading writer for *Fortune*. Focusing on social change and urban observation, Whyte was best known for his 1956 book *The Organization Man* and his ten-year long “Street Life Project.” See: William Hollingsworth Whyte and Albert LaFarge, *The Essential William H. Whyte* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

⁴³ “The Rich Middle-Income Class,” *Fortune* (May 1954): 94-99.

the markers of success.

A primary symbol of accomplishment was home ownership. Between 1940 and 1956 the number of American owner-occupied homes rose from less than twelve million to more than twenty-five million. By the mid-1950s, sixty percent of all nonfarm families were homeowners, growth made possible by the availability of mortgage financing (often government backed) and the increasing availability of detached homes.⁴⁴ According to one scholar, “As consumption and possession came to symbolize class mobility and status, traditional qualifiers of status such as inherited wealth or family name no longer sufficed to create clear boundaries of class.”⁴⁵ As home ownership became more common among the American population, improvement assumed a greater role in expressing and maintaining status. Increasingly it was the up-to-date and stylish nature of the home rather than home ownership itself that served to distinguish.

Those who owned and improved their own dwellings were at the end of a long list of consumers, and even they did not consume exclusively (or passively). The rhetoric that postwar manufacturers, advertisers, dealers, and scammers deployed did not suggest that they had this market figured out, or that a cornered, compliant consumer was putty in their hands. Instead, it shows promoters attempting to understand a consumer who was savvy, assertive, and engaged in reciprocal and multi-sided exchanges. They traded their time reading magazines, books and brochures, they browsed showrooms and store aisles, and importantly, they traded recommendations, leveraging their image as impartial, trustworthy parties in exchange for promised discounts, self-pride, and vanity. Word-of-mouth and testimonials from satisfied

⁴⁴ *Housing in the United States*, 19.

⁴⁵ Kristi S. Long, and Matthew Nadelhaft, *America Under Construction: Boundaries and Identities in Popular Culture* (New York: Garland Pub, 1997), 22.

customers, especially if they were known and trusted, grew in value as expert advice and sophisticated marketing campaigns proliferated (Figure 0.2). Some homeowners served as referral representatives, or "subsidiary salesmen" earning commissions by recommending products and using their homes as public showrooms.⁴⁶

Homeowner consumers traded their labor by adding "sweat equity" to many projects. Though it has received almost no attention compared to that given to the do-it-yourself trend, there was a concurrent appearance of design-it-yourself marketing. In doing and in designing, homeowners modified to suit their particular needs and skills those projects that appeared in guides and magazine articles.⁴⁷ They adapted materials, assemblies, and rooms to fit the way they wanted to use them, which wasn't always as manufacturers, dealers, and editors advised. In theoretical terms, they did not subscribe to the scripts inscribed in designs by their designers.⁴⁸

In many ways, the postwar era was the era of the housewife (Figure 0.3). Historians have argued that a retrenchment took place at this time in which women returned to the home and retreated from public life.⁴⁹ It was a reversal of the war years

⁴⁶ The term is used in: "Reach Opinion Leaders . . . And Your Reach the Masses. Interview with Paul Lazarsfeld," *Printer's Ink* (May 11, 1956): 44-50. This was an era of selling. Magazines and popular how-to guides espoused secret advice to turn introverts into sales leaders and promised sales as a route to personal validation and community esteem. One, Frank Bettger's 1949 book *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling* sold 300,000 copies and went through twenty printings. See also: Daniel Seligman, "The Latest 'Secrets' of Selling," *Fortune* (June 1956): 123-25. *Salesman's Opportunity* magazine was a leading promoter of full and part-time selling careers.

⁴⁷ Though usually lumped together as amateurs or "Weekend Carpenters," do-it-yourselfers had varying levels of experience gained from related professions, working on past building projects, perhaps with fathers or older siblings, from necessity starting with small repairs made during the Depression, and in some cases from finishing kit houses or shell houses in the past. Some had no prior experience with building or using tools.

⁴⁸ In discussing attempts to analyze scripts (formal and other qualities intended to express function and meaning) embedded in products, Kjetil Fallan cautions that "there is always the chance that the actors decide not to play the role the designers ascribe to them or that the users misunderstand, ignore, discard or reject the instruction manual and define their roles and the product's use and meaning at odds with the producer's/designer's intentions as conveyed through the script." Kjetil Fallan, *Design History: Understanding Theory and Methods* (New York: Berg, 2010), 82.

⁴⁹ For historical context for the term housewife, see: Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1989), xvi. In fact, at the beginning of the 1950s, a quarter of the married women in the United States worked outside the home.

when male absence and female industrial employment eroded gender distinctions. In terms of physical work, home improvement promotion after 1945 ostensibly embraced such a retreat and reinforced earlier gender roles. Ads showed women who once worked wartime rivet guns and other industrial machinery holding kitchen mixers, not drills and saws. Men altered exteriors, women decorated the interior; men did structural work, women dealt with finishes. If remodeling promoters generally excluded women from the visual rhetoric of substantial do-it-yourself work, they did present design, at least in the kitchen and living room, as an activity where women could provide valuable contributions. Perhaps more importantly, home improvement promoters acknowledged the central role of women as consumers. Postwar women had greater power to purchase products for the home and were more assertive in determining where those purchases would be made than ever before. They also had a greater say in the purchase of "big ticket" items, decisions than in past were typically left to the husband.⁵⁰ Women actually initiated more home improvement projects than their spouses, they also planned projects, researched alternatives and material options, and often did more of the work than the advertising imagery suggested.⁵¹

Overlapping Themes

Home improvement boosters often built their pitches upon a framework of beliefs and

Karel Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 226. Historians beginning in the 1990s problematized the retreat of the postwar woman, arguing that women's experiences after the war were complicated and gender ideologies more unstable than earlier characterizations of retrenchment allow. See especially, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ Their purchasing power was also felt in other sectors of the economy such as the automobile market where manufacturers began to develop first promotional and sales techniques and eventually actual car designs that reflected (what manufacturers thought of as) particularly feminine concerns over space, security, reliability, and easy handling. Margaret Walsh, "Gender and Automobility: Selling Cars to American Women After the Second World War," *Journal of Macromarketing* 31, no. 1 (2011): 57-72.

⁵¹ Carolyn Goldstein, *Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in 20th-Century America* (Washington, DC: National Building Museum, 1998), 69.

assumptions common in American culture. Three favored postwar assumptions were: 1) that new was better than old and change preferable to stasis, 2) the right to personal transformation and (re) invention, and 3) that the characteristics of an object or place should reflect the unique body, mind, and behaviors of its owner. America's privileging of the new and youthful gave remodeling pitches a running start. Consumers were already prepared for appeals to purge the old and replacing it with the novel. Contemporaneous with home improvement's ascent was the rise of a postwar cult of youth and a cultural quest to retain or regain that youth in any way possible. It was discernible in the cosmetic and hair dye aisle, in the construction of the teenager as a distinct species, in the new, treeless suburbs, and the annual release of new car models that made last year's version instantly passé. Remodeled kitchens and new exterior finishes promised to beat back decay and deterioration and returned the home to an idealized state of vitality. There was a moral quality to this insistence upon casting the old aside that also threaded its way through twentieth century Modernist architectural discourse. Le Corbusier, referring to the house as the essential and first human-created tool, argued there was an ethical imperative to discard such devices when no longer useful. According to Corbusier, "we do not have the right to produce badly because of bad tools; we do not have the right to use up our strength, our health and our courage because of bad tools; we throw out, we replace."⁵² The flipside of the new was the obsolete. Installing the latest fashion in home furnishings, finishes or layouts guaranteed stylistic obsolescence within a short period of time.⁵³ Home improvement promoters hoped to reduce that period by convincing consumers

⁵² Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture* (Los Angeles: Getty Publication, 2007), 93.

⁵³ Nigel Whiteley attributed a fading in the power of style obsolescence to the 1960s rise of consumer protection and exposés by Packard and others. Nigel Whiteley, "Toward a Throw Away Culture. Consumerism, 'Style Obsolescence' and Cultural Theory in the 1950s and 60s," *Oxford Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (1987): 8.

that they should update their bathrooms or kitchens as often (and with as little consideration) as they changed their wardrobe. Manufacturers and retailers did not want customers to wait for products to physically degrade before they considered replacements.

Remodeling promotion extended popular conceptions of the reconfigurable self and the perfectible body into the built environment. Sales pitches featured the alluring rhetoric of transformation. Upgrades would convert weekends spent painting into weekends spent relaxing and remake conventional homes into exceptional ones. Distinguished homes heightened the distinction of their owners. Remodeling has always been an expressive, performative practice, remaking of the home equaled remaking the self for others to see. The new living room or back patio, functioned as part of what Erving Goffman called a “setting”—background, scenery, stage props—in which people act to impress an image of themselves upon others. Living rooms, décor, the physical layout of a house, all serve as “sign-equipment” that individuals deploy to signal to others their status and character.⁵⁴ Remodeling was motivated in part by the desire to augment one’s social standing; if status increased in other ways (through a promotion, a raise, an inheritance) remodeling often accompanied and reinforced this raising.

To emphasize immediate transformation and prompt considerations of a completed project, promoters deployed the visual convention of before and after images. Such juxtapositions have long served as rhetorical devices dramatizing change, natural and human-made, for good and for bad.⁵⁵ In the postwar era, before

⁵⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 22.

⁵⁵ For example, Augustus Pugin's 1841 book *Contrasts* argued the moral superiority of "glorious" Middle Age architecture by comparing etchings with those of the "miserably mutilated" industrial present. Paired photos in picture books and postcards illustrated, the devastation wrought by the Great Chicago Fire, the World War II bombing of Ypres, and American urban renewal programs. Prior and post treatment photos vouched for the efficacy of hair tonics and weight-loss pills.

and afters exemplified a broader national obsession with transformation, reinvention, and the thwarting of time. Buildings, bodies, and self-images could be remade at will. Diptych series by Roy Lichtenstein ("Step-on Can with Leg," 1961) and Andy Warhol ("Nose Job," 1961) played with these narratives of change through the conventions of advertising and the mass media (Figure 0.6). Postwar promoters represented before and after conditions most commonly in photographs, but they also used acetate overlays and promotional films. Such depictions concealed the labor, expense, and time that remodeling projects required. Offered up as impartial documentation, marketers considered before and after imagery an especially persuasive selling aid. Yet, even early on compositional conventions emerged that belied before and after photography's supposed objectivity. Before photos were grainy or out of focus, depopulated, taken in adverse weather and set skewed within in the page layout; afters were invariably larger, color whenever possible, and inhabited by happy homeowners.

The remodeling industry advanced the convention as an aspirational tool, establishing visual stories of success and articulating the benefits of improvement. Paired, sequential photographs borrowed legitimacy from the photo essay (while compressing that form to its essence) and relied upon the presumed veracity of the photograph. While their efficacy was due in part to this trust in photographic image as truth-teller, the nature of the selective juxtaposition of two images created a narrative space where that truth could be bent and reshaped to the dictates of the market. Like legitimate dealers, swindlers used before and after photos to persuade customers of the favorable results they could obtain from the proposed project. They also imbricated homeowners in the process by promising to use photos of their homes in future advertising.

Finally, home transformation was articulated as an analog to transformation of

the human (primarily female) body.⁵⁶ During the postwar era, a new level of cultural attention was paid to corporeal transformation. Advertisements throughout the period celebrated opportunities to transform the home and the physique and the face. Charles Atlas' ads in the back of 1940s and 50s comic books assured kids they could easily remake themselves from weakling to muscleman that commanded respect and admiration. Like the house, the body was a cultural and social construction. Self-fashioning of one's body and identity was a postmodern phenomenon, a practice of malleability directed toward gratification. Stefan Brandt has written about this "culture of corporeality:"

Since the 1950s we have been presented with a large number of potential forms of the body, none of them fitting into the traditional concept of the unified self. These bodies are at once agents for perpetual fulfillment of individual needs and the objects of booming industries that aim at the production and promotion of these needs. One of the main targets of postmodern culture is the "desiring body," which is continually instigated to search for gratification and optimization of its energetic potential.⁵⁷

Sander Gilman links the rise of aesthetic surgery in the twentieth century to a racialized notion of "passing," the desire of individuals who perceive they are excluded from one group to change their appearance to blend in and be accepted by that excluding group; accompanying this transfer is the move from unhappiness to happiness. Aesthetic surgery allowed individuals to pass for attractive, or young, or virile.⁵⁸ It is possible to see this desire for "passing" at work in persuasive arguments

⁵⁶ For a discussion of house as female body, see: Mark Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 327-389.

⁵⁷ Stefan L. Brandt, *The Culture of Corporeality: Aesthetic Experience and the Embodiment of America 1945-1960*, American Studies (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 60.

⁵⁸ Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 21-22. According to Gilman, "A rigid boundary between youth and age is not universally present across cultures and across history, but at the turn of the twentieth century, the number of individuals who desired to 'pass' as youthful began to increase." Ibid., 295. Aesthetic

for remodeling. A house is old, out of date, and its appearance keeps its owners from full acceptance as Americans who embrace a national emphasis on youth, progress, and modernity. Only by reconfiguring their homes can they see themselves and be seen by others as part of this broader national project.

Remodeling promotions celebrated how homeowners could create spaces of individuality through the reworking of their homes. This desire for distinction was partly a reaction to the landscape in which many Americans lived—in new suburbs, along nearly identical streets, in homes designed for past occupants with different lifestyles. Postwar homeowners looked for ways to make their houses homes, to fulfill a need for distinction and American culture's expectation that they be uncomfortable in homes that did not reflect their personalities. "The pride of most Americans will not allow them to be homogenized into sameness," said the owner of a remodeled Levittown house in *House Beautiful*. The 1956 article likened owners of mass housing who undertook customization, to "millions of individual roots cracking through the concrete of conformity and they all add up to a new hope, a new force, a new excitement that is changing the face and spirit of America."⁵⁹

By modifying their houses to fit their habits and hobbies owners distinguished themselves from others in their neighborhood. Every addition, every porch enclosure or patio, every carport, and basement recreation room could be considered an assertion of American individualism. Even small acts like replacing the stock street numbers that came with the house or adding shutters could be important acts of differentiation. William H. Whyte's 1954 study of residential air conditioner adoption revealed how

surgeons, many of whom obtained their expertise in World War I reconstructive surgery, appeared promising "patients uniquely effective therapies for becoming happy, healthy, and whole. In all these efforts there has lurked an additional promise, the dream of a renewed, perhaps even eternal youth, or at least its appearance." Ibid., 294.

⁵⁹ Ralph G. Martin, "How Individuality Got a Second Chance," *House Beautiful* (February 1956): 169.

such changes took on added importance in neighborhoods characterized by similar homes (in this case Philadelphia row houses). According to Whyte, "The more similar most things are [like houses], the more important the minor differences become. When everyone lives in an identical house, the most important item of their estate is washed out as a factor, and the marginal purchases become the key ones."⁶⁰

Postwar building material and equipment manufacturers produced a constant stream of new product lines: kitchen cabinets, counters, flooring, sheet wall coverings, and appliances. In part due to industrial rationalization and standardization, these materials were more affordable than ever before. Developments in sheet steel fabrication and plastics, and the nearly complete process of domestic electrification enabled appliance manufacturers to mass produce heavy and light appliances and sell them on an unprecedented scale. When more and more consumer goods were looking alike and going into similar houses, manufacturers used the sales pitch of customization and personalization to sell remodeling projects.

At a 1949 meeting of housing experts, a Macy's department store director observed, "when the building industry consults the consumer it comes out with answers that increase the difficulties of mass production."⁶¹ The executive was referring to the housewife's desire to make a place her own, to add variation to products that allowed her to feel it reflected her tastes and habits. In part, it was a desire incited by the manufacturers themselves, as a means of encouraging dissatisfaction and prompting remodeling. Throughout the period manufacturers sought a balance between personalization and standardization, between telling consumers that their homes should be unique, and the limitations of what industry could produce efficiently. They developed marketing strategies that presented their

⁶⁰ Whyte, "The Web of Word of Mouth," 204.

⁶¹ Russell W. Davenport, "A Life Round Table on Housing," *Life* (January 31, 1949): 73.

products as limitlessly adaptable and configurable, ready for the easy planning and application by amateurs. By becoming involved in the remodeling (either as designer or do-er) the homeowner was best able to articulate their priorities and preferences.

Remodeling Literature

Architectural historians have often privileged iconic buildings as static art objects at the peak of significance the moment builders pack up their tools and depart the site. In part, this disinterest in mutability was inherited from its parent field, art history.

Buildings were formal monuments isolated from the vagaries of time, taste, shifting ownership, and cultural mores, not impermanent objects of material culture subject to alteration by non-designers. Adaptation equaled defilement. When architectural historians mentioned remodeling, it was often with the intention of informing new design, to “better understand the direction to take when it comes to building the types of homes that best match the households who live in them.”⁶²

The rise of vernacular architectural studies beginning in the 1960s expanded the range of building types and themes considered worthy of academic investigation. While vernacular architecture scholars mostly focused on the morphological evolution of ideas from place to place and from successive iteration-to-iteration, some saw the modification of individual homes as an important carrier of cultural meaning.⁶³ Three historians who helped define the field of vernacular architecture, Dell Upton, Thomas Hubka and Elizabeth Collins Cromley, have consistently incorporated a malleable and evolutionary characterization of buildings in their work. Upton, for example, has written about how nineteenth century “architectural entrepreneurs” and writers pushed

⁶² Avi Friedman and David Krawitz, *Peeking Through the Keyhole: The Evolution of North American Homes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

⁶³ Which is ironic considering that vernacular forms have historically been understood and celebrated as loci of enduring rather than transient values. Dell Upton, “The Tradition of Change,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 5, no. 1 (1993): 11.

a “consumerist ethos” that include updating the appearance of middle class American homes in accordance with professionally-defined aesthetics. Such changes intentionally severed links to traditional house forms and traditional builders in favor of design by architects.⁶⁴ Hubka has examined processes of altering and expanding New England farmsteads as well as the changes worker and immigrant communities made to their homes during the first third of the twentieth century. Alterations and expansion of the dwellings likewise marked the group’s increasing role as consumers in the American economy.⁶⁵ Elizabeth Collins Cromley's paper "Modernizing: Or, 'You Never See a Screen Door on Affluent Homes,'" examined how homeowners in Queens, New York adapted similarly designed row houses to express their individuality while reinforcing community bonds.⁶⁶ Owner-initiated reworkings of kitchen and dining spaces figure continually in her 2010 book *The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating and the Architecture of American Houses*.⁶⁷

Gaps in the architectural history of the home as mutable object have been partially addressed by popular writers and by academics in related fields. Cultural historians and material culture scholars, for example, have developed a body of work on the improvement of American housing from the early settlement period to the mid-nineteenth century. Richard Bushman and Edward Chappell have examined how

⁶⁴ Though Upton deals with this theme in a number of publications, it is summarized in: Dell Upton, "The Traditional House and Its Enemies," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 1 (1990): 71-84.

⁶⁵ Thomas C. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England* (Hanover, [N.H.]: University Press of New England, 2004) and Thomas C. Hubka and Judith C. Kenny, "Examining the American Dream: Housing Standards and the Emergence of a National Housing Culture, 1900-1930," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 13, no. 1 (2006): 49-69.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Collins Cromley, "Modernizing: Or, 'You Never See a Screen Door on Affluent Homes,'" *Journal of American Culture* 5, no. 2 (1982): 71-79. A decade later Cromley wrote: Elizabeth Collins Cromley, "A History of American Beds and Bedrooms, 1890-1930," in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

⁶⁷ Cromley, *The Food Axis*.

desires for refinement, gentility, and comfort were expressed through architectural improvement during this period, especially by a nascent middle class eager to distinguish itself from those below.⁶⁸ In 2007, historian of literature Duncan Faherty examined how the ideas of renewal and improvement articulated through house metaphors were central to the formulation of American identity in the early Republic.⁶⁹

Scholars of twentieth century consumerism and postwar culture have addressed remodeling to varying degrees. Stephen Gelber ties home improvement and do-it-yourself into a context of postwar hobbies and crafts.⁷⁰ Lizabeth Cohen's book *A Consumers Republic* reads the imperatives of postwar mass culture in consumption practices especially those related to the home.⁷¹ Regina Lee Blaszczyk has also interpreted the American consumer experience through the lens of housing attitudes and domestic architecture marketing. Her book *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation From Wedgwood to Corning* interprets the persuasive strategies of product manufacturers and notions of domesticity during the first half of the twentieth

⁶⁸ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992) and Edward A. Chappell, "Housing a Nation: The Transformation of Living Standards in Early America," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994). For a regional analysis, see: Small, Nora Pat. *Beauty & Convenience: Architecture and Order in the New Republic*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003. A more recent interpretation, that attempts to reconcile improvement with migration, can be found in: Carole Shammas, "The Housing Stock of the Early United States: Refinement Meets Migration," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2007): 549-590.

⁶⁹ Duncan Faherty, *Remodeling the Nation: The Architecture of American Identity 1776-1858* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007).

⁷⁰ Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁷¹ According to Cohen, "home in the suburbanized Consumers' Republic became a mass consumer commodity to be appraised and traded up like a car rather than a longstanding emotional investment in a particular neighborhood, ethnic community, or church parish, "property values" became the new mantra." Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 202. For Cohen's views on how architectural history can inform social history, see: Lizabeth Cohen, "American Social History: A Historian's Labor in the Built Environment," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 1 (March 2006): 10-11.

century.⁷² In a chapter about the plumbing company Kohler, Blaszczyk identifies how this firm tied its own project of improvement (of employee housing at its company town) with the rhetoric of improving American housing through the use of its products. It was a harbinger of how postwar remodeling retailers undertook frequent store remodeling campaigns to prompt a similar pace of remodeling among their customers. Blaszczyk's *American Consumer Society 1865–2005: From Hearth to HDTV* offers a comprehensive survey of consumption (as the subtitle suggests, of domestic objects especially) as both measure and expression of social status in the United States.⁷³ Cohen and Blaszczyk both link domestic architecture consumption with expressions of identity, personality, and the self.⁷⁴ They, along with sociologist Sharon Zukin and anthropologist Grant McCracken, recognize the centrality of the American home to issues of consumption, self-identity, and impression management—a centrality reinforced by hackneyed, but enduring and revealing notions of the American Dream and “keeping up with the Joneses.”⁷⁵

While all of the works above address remodeling within wider studies, there are few works in any field that take on home improvement as a central subject. In *How Buildings Learn* author Stewart Brand sought patterns and aphorisms that identify,

⁷² Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation From Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

⁷³ Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society: 1865-2005: From Hearth to HDTV* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 2009).

⁷⁴ On the process of refashioning the self through consumption, also see: Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007).

⁷⁵ For a summary of Zukin's framing of consumption from a sociological perspective, see: Sharon Zukin, and Jennifer Smith Maguire, "Consumers and Consumption," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 173-197. Zukin has written widely on the built environment (especially urban sites) from a sociological perspective. McCracken examines consumption as cultural expression in: Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990). His essay on homeyness more directly addresses consumption and the American dwelling. Grant McCracken, "'Homeyness' A Cultural Account of One Constellation of Consumer Goods and Meanings," in *Interpretive Consumer Research*, ed. E. C. Hirschman (New York: Association for Consumer Research, 1989).

anticipate, and accommodate change in building appearance and function across a wide variety of architectural types and time periods.⁷⁶ The journalism and media scholar Barbara Kelly, in her case study of Levittown, New York, saw the significance of postwar merchant-built suburbs not only in their scale, and not at all in the superficial conformity that seemed to dominate their original appearance. Rather, Kelly found these places revealing much more about American homeownership, gender, and family attitudes when she directed attention to the ways inhabitants altered and adapted the houses over time.⁷⁷ Public historian Carolyn Goldstein's *Do-It-Yourself, Home Improvement in the Twentieth Century*, and a related exhibition *Do-it-Yourself* at the National Building Museum provided a broad introduction to amateur undertaken home improvement as a national trend.⁷⁸

The most recent work, and thus far the deepest investigation of remodeling as a distinct phenomenon, is Richard Harris's 2012 monograph, *Building a Market: The Rise of the Home Improvement Industry, 1914-1960*.⁷⁹ A geographer and urbanist, Harris examines how owner-builder practices of the interwar period and do-it-yourself movement pushed lumber dealers to turn to homeowners as a valuable market. By the postwar era, according to Harris, earlier trends "gelled" and the consumer-based residential remodeling market matured. Despite this work's depth, detail and insights into subjects scholars have heretofore overlooked, the book's focus was limited primarily to the development of an infrastructure within the building materials

⁷⁶ Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (London: Phoenix Illustrated, 1994).

⁷⁷ Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁷⁸ The National Building Museum hosted *Do-it-Yourself* between October 2002 and August 2003.

⁷⁹ Harris, *Building a Market*. Harris has published two papers with material eventually incorporated into the book: Richard Harris, "A New Form of Credit: The State Promotes Home Improvement, 1934-1954," *Journal of Policy History* 21, no. 4 (2009): 392-423., and Richard Harris, "The Birth of the North American Home Improvement Store, 1905-1929," *Enterprise and Society* 10, no. 4 (2009): 687-728.

industry for selling to consumers. The physical interventions that professionals and amateurs made in the postwar house and the intersection of popular culture and rhetoric of remodeling persuasion are not areas of focus. Yet Harris' book is an invaluable contribution to the understanding of remodeling history and a reminder that while postwar remodeling promotion took on unique attributes colored by the times, the origins of postwar pitches can often be traced back decades earlier.

Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic* quotes a postwar *Newsweek* article that identified "upgrading" as a quintessential American ritual marked by "the continual movement toward bigger houses, better neighborhoods, and more possessions as incomes rise and children arrive."⁸⁰ While the peripatetic social climbing and sorting Cohen describes was indeed an essential characteristic of postwar housing consumption, so was another form of upgrading, namely, the physical alteration and expansion of existing homes. This study is the first to interpret the history of postwar remodeling promotion and to trace its rhetorical power to predominant themes in American culture. In part, its significance comes from addressing a subject that has not received significant academic attention. Scholars of postwar consumption, of gender, of urbanism and suburbanism, and American Studies, social historians and cultural and architectural historians have all overlooked this practice.⁸¹ My work continues earlier efforts to address this historiographic imbalance.

Writings about nineteenth century improvement cover a time when

⁸⁰ Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 202.

⁸¹ As one illustrative example, the 1920s Better Homes Campaign and the 1930s government-sponsored initiatives to promote remodeling through the President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership have yet to receive through scholarly attention.⁸¹ In the historiography of urbanism and city planning, remodeling initiatives have received much less attention than slum clearance and postwar urban renewal projects. A notable exception is Gabrielle Esperdy's work on the modernization of American commercial architecture during the interwar period in 2008.⁸¹

consumption was on the rise but not yet ubiquitous (across class, age, and geographic strata). It is especially important to examine the history of remodeling in the postwar era when it first became such a crucial part of the American economy. Studying the appearance and character of the consumer remodeling market in the two decades after 1945 doesn't only fill in the historic record. It also provides important opportunities to contextualize the rise of an industry and market that continued to grow in economic and cultural significance in the decades following this study. Turn on a television, radio, or digital device streaming the internet and you hear commercials sponsored by Lowe's or The Home Depot or a local remodeling retailer or contractor with surprising regularity. Virtually every economically vibrant shopping area has a big box home improvement outlet. In 2011 Americans spent \$275 billion on home improvement. Yet housing analysts considered this inadequate, noting that investment in improvement as a percent average share of gross domestic product declined significantly between 1988 and 2008. Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies argued in early 2013 that America's housing stock was "Ready for Renewal."⁸² The report noted that more than a quarter of remodeling spending was discretionary, meaning that it was not spending on essential replacements or system upgrades to maintain the physical integrity of the structure but rather spending on elective changes motivated by changing tastes and preferences for newer features. A historical context for remodeling promotion can help scholars identify that crucial interstitial terrain where consumer needs and wants elide. Examining the rhetoric of postwar remodeling promotion sheds light on the processes of physical changes made to American residential architecture during this time; it also tests a framework for integrating

⁸² Total spending on remodeling and repair in 2011 were was down from a 2007 peak of \$329 billion but growth was expected to rise again in 2013. *The U. S. Housing Stock: Ready for Renewal* (Cambridge: Joint Center for Housing Studies/Harvard University, 2013), 2.

consumer practices more fully into the field of architectural history.

Methodology

As an architectural history and as a cultural history this study looks across individual experiences in an attempt to expose larger trends that pushed postwar home improvement. It gathers a large sample of remodeling rhetoric and analyzes items in relation to each other. It also seeks to identify overlap between this rhetoric and that found in other cultural currents—domestication of the Cold War, personalization, design authority, consumerism—to identify how these realms interacted during this era. The decision to organize the project in this way was partly driven by the availability of source materials, the contours of the periods under consideration, and most of all by a personal interest in how a broad group of American homeowners saw common cause in home improvement.

An investigation of improvement promotion involving multiple industries, that is national in scope, covers multiple decades, and integrates ongoing processes of architectural evolution with myriad contributing cultural factors is dauntingly complicated. Louis Nelson and Marta Gutman recently noted, "Change over time in real places is messy and unstable."⁸³ Postwar remodeling happened spottily. In different areas of the country, at different economic levels, even on different streets in a neighborhood, remodeling occurred unevenly in fits and starts. The subject of home improvement promotion is complicated for the scholar, in part, because it was complicated for those dealers, manufacturers, advertisers, and salesmen undertaking it

⁸³ Louis P. Nelson and Marta Gutman, "Editor's Introduction," *Buildings & Landscapes* 18 no. 2 (Fall 2011): vi.

at the time. Richard Harris writes that, "no industry contains more significant complexity than residential construction and its partner, home improvement. As its suppliers, building manufacturers and retailers struggle to make sense of a level of complexity that can become bewildering and inscrutable in periods of rapid change."⁸⁴

Attempting to identify shared experiences and unifying trends related to remodeling necessitates generalization.⁸⁵ As was mentioned above, regional variations in how improvement was practiced are largely subsumed into the larger narrative this work constructs. Improvement meant different things in different places. While identifying patterns of promotion across geographic and across demographic lines, this work acknowledges that the first decades of the postwar period were never as homogeneous or conformist as their popular image suggests. They were full of tensions and negotiations over gender roles, race, class, civic duty, and the meaning of patriotism and success. Even the middle-class, detached home owning, largely white section of the population that is the focus of this study disintegrates into innumerable subsections upon close inspection.⁸⁶ Doting housewives and flannel-suited capitalists lived among divorcees and New Deal Democrats. Values, attitudes, and aspirations

⁸⁴ Harris, *Building a Market*, 4.

⁸⁵ On the drawbacks and benefits of generalization in historical writing, see: David A. Shannon and Eric Russell Lacy, "The Study of History and the Critical Mind," in *Readings on Historical Method* (New York: MSS Educational Publishing Company, 1969), 120-122.

⁸⁶ Contemporary parlance is repeated in this study without accepting the assumptions and expectations originally embedded in it. For example, during the first two decades following the Second World War, the word "family" referred explicitly to a group of two parents of opposite gender and their direct offspring. The term further implied distinct gender roles with husband-father as primary earner and wife-mother as nurturer and domestic manager. "Single-family home" likewise conveyed this normative force while transposing it into architectural space. Remodeling promoters and the authors of proscriptive literature advocating home improvement quite intentionally used family in this way. The term then is used in its original context to reflect this narrow conception of domestic life and domestic norms. Where the discussion turns to the present day, the more expansive and inclusive term household is used.

were not universal across this group.⁸⁷ The following chapters attempt to bridge distinct experiences while acknowledging these distinctions and their complicating (and enriching) effects.

Questions about how far to extend insights based on the experiences of a white, middle class population to the broader American population are especially tricky. Working class homeowners were equally likely to engage in do-it-yourself activities, but it was less likely that major advertising and marketing campaigns inspired those projects. Those secure about their financial and social status may have been less receptive to calls for remodeling. As Elizabeth Collins Cromley has stated in regard to historical shifts in kitchen design, "Changes or improvements made in the food-axis design by one class do not automatically translate to another class, nor do all those who could afford changes make them at the same time."⁸⁸

To tease out the important ways in which class identification and aspiration influenced remodeling activities, a broad understanding of class is adopted for this work. It considers class not as a stratum neatly defined by income or occupation, but rather in terms of self-identification. In other words, an individual's self-perception as

⁸⁷ And the suburbs where remodeling often occurred were not identical. Robert Bruegmann notes that, "contrary to a great deal of what has been written about the "Ozzie and Harriet" suburbs of the 1950s, American suburbs were not a uniform mass of white, middle-class bedroom communities, and they were not distinctly different from central cities. Some suburbs were primarily residential, but many were commercial centers, accommodating office buildings and factories for the expanding number of companies relocating from locations closer in." Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 44. Other notable critiques of postwar conformist stereotypes include Joel Foreman, *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997) and Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*. Arthur Wright, calls the historian's tendency to ascribe shared characteristics, values, and tendencies to a group "labeling generalizations." Quoted in: E. Sreedharan, *A Manual of Historical Research Methodology* (Trivandrum, India: South Indian Studies, 2007), 92.

⁸⁸ Cromley, *Food Axis*, 85.

a member of the middle class and their resulting attitudes and actions are more revealing than whether their take home pay or their job met specific criterion. Membership in the postwar American middle class, then, was defined by differentiation—of consumption or political practices, of education—from those above and those below.⁸⁹

This work draws primarily upon two strains of prescriptive literature from the period, one produced by manufacturers and dealers targeting homeowner-consumers, the other that manufacturers aimed at local retailers, dealers, and contactors in the remodeling industry. Mass circulation magazine and newspaper articles, industry-produced brochures and flyers, and advertisements made up the largest single type of promotional literature aimed at consumers. Books by authors claiming expertise in various disciplines as well as ephemera such as brochures, pamphlets, radio scripts, films and television commercials were also included. A survey of postwar advertising reveals the increasingly close cooperation between publications, advertisers, local dealers, and manufacturers. The latter, through outside agencies and in house services provided newspapers with ad mats, layout templates, and guidance on attracting local

⁸⁹ In this formulation, class “becomes a class through self-awareness or a consciousness of distinctiveness, which it achieves through the formulation of a distinctive culture, through political and economic organization to promote its interests, and ultimately through expressions of antagonism.” Michael J. Doucet and John C. Weaver, *Housing the North American City* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1991), 319. Michael Katz described this “class-for-itself” model in, Michael J. Doucet, and Mark J. Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Elizabeth Cromley also alludes to this interpretation in: Elizabeth Collins Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 7.

advertisers.⁹⁰ These documents featured a normative discourse that reinforced certain cultural practices and ideas with the intention of making remodeling a process that every American homeowner was expected to undertake. The question presented to homeowners was not if they should improve their homes, but how.

Any study of postwar mass marketing necessarily addresses the content of nationally circulated magazines that were expanding in number and influence throughout American culture. While the United States population increased 45 percent between 1939 and 1963, the combined circulation of national magazines more than doubled during that period.⁹¹ Remodeling rhetoric in the form of articles and advertisements appeared in *Life*, *Changing Times*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Redbook*, *McCall's*, *House Beautiful*, *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics* and numerous other popular lifestyle, home, and hobby magazines.⁹² Those with a focus on homemaking, such as *Better Homes & Gardens* and *Sunset*, were especially common sites for remodeling articles and advertisements. Newspapers likewise carried articles and advertisements for local dealers often in new dedicated weekly home sections.

At the same time, these publications were scrambling to identify the preferences and shopping habits of home improvement consumers and to develop effective ways of selling to them. Magazines like *McCall's* and *Ladies Home Journal*

⁹⁰ For a description of how U. S. Steel's advertising service worked with newspapers to increase home modernization coverage in the latter 1950s, see: "Home Modernization Kit Offers Linage," *Editor & Publisher* 93 (1960): 22.

⁹¹ *Magazine Circulation and Rate Trends 1940-1963*, Association of National Advertisers (New York: Association of National Advertisers, 1964), 5. The ANA tracked magazine circulation for the benefit of its members. In 1963 it identified over 280 magazines with over 200,000 average net paid circulation and \$1,000,000 advertising revenue.

⁹² Ibid. In 1955, *Life* had a circulation of 5.6 million. *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science* both had circulations of around 1.2 million in 1955.

hired faculty from home economic programs, and the graduates of such, who had been trained to introduce homemakers to new domestic technologies. Such experts, though their work often involved collaboration with industry and shared objectives with industry, had the advantage of appearing impartial and their advice seeming more objective. Advertisements in these publications are an obvious source for insights into how manufacturers and dealers addressed consumers, what arguments they used, what imagery they thought effective, what desires and insecurities they played upon. Advertising expenditures by all sectors of American industry saw phenomenal increases during the postwar era. By 1956 total national and local spending on advertising reached \$9.25 billion, an increase of more \$860 million in two years. Spending on magazine ads increased nine percent during the previous two years.⁹³

The second domain in which remodeling promotion appeared was the nationally published trade journal read by dealers, sales staff, contractors, and installers. In the pages of trade magazines manufacturers directed sales pitches (in the form of articles and ads) at the retailers who would sell the manufacturers' products. For this study I concentrate on three publications. Published in Chicago, the *American Lumberman and Building Products Merchandiser* was the main trade publication of the lumber and building materials retailer dating back to the nineteenth century. *Domestic Engineering* had a readership of plumbers, and heating and ventilation contractors, many of whom were opening public showrooms intended to appeal to consumers and promote remodeling. Hardware merchants had several publications

⁹³ "More for Almost Everyone," *Business Week* (March 17, 1956): 62. Spending on television advertisements increased 25 percent between 1954 and 1956.

catering to their needs including *Hardware News*, *Hardware Retailer*, *Hardware and Housewares*, and *Hardware Age*. The latter was a middling publication, which, like the other journals, encouraged its subscribers to engage with the growing home improvement market.⁹⁴

Though it focuses on promotional rhetoric, this work rarely makes claims about the efficacy or the rightness or wrongness of the claims that promoters made in popular or trade publications. My interest, rather, is in how promoters coopted and reinterpreted cultural themes to sell new kitchens, siding, recreation rooms, additions, and other forms of remodeling. Whether the authors of this material believed the claims they published is almost irrelevant. The important consideration is that the manufacturers, retailers, magazine writers, and advertising agencies believed that their pitches would persuade consumers to initiate (or spend more on) remodeling projects.

This study examines how promoters composed advertisements that they hoped would prompt postwar homeowners to drive down to the new remodeling store and commit to an improvement project. But it also move beyond the advertisement's explicit message, to trace how these forms of communication tended, in the words of Jackson Lears, to "slip past the narrow, instrumental purpose of selling goods to acquire broader and more elusive cultural meaning."⁹⁵ Lears describes how advertising creates symbolic universe out of didactic and dreamy narratives that he called "fables of abundance." In this work I attempt to identify aspects of this narrative universe that

⁹⁴ *American Lumberman* had a circulation in 1955 of just over 27,000. *Domestic Engineering* had a circulation of about 19,000 at the same time. of approximately 37,000 in the mid-1950s. N. W. Ayer & Son's *Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer & Son, Inc., 1955).

⁹⁵ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 1.

relate to the American single family home, the American single family, and the way these two constructs interacted during the postwar period.

While I attempted to be both objective and comprehensive in the source documentation I assembled, postwar consumers were less catholic in their reading habits. Different people read different magazines, identified with different TV shows, lived in different neighborhoods with varying accessibility to the stores and models described below. Advertisements resonated with different people in different ways.⁹⁶ Advertisers recognized the tendency of consumers to misread or reinterpret messages conveyed in advertising that the advertisers originally assumed were clear and obvious.⁹⁷ The fact that little is presently known about the reception of these materials by consumers is acknowledged.

Chapter Outlines

The first chapter, "Obligations and Expectations," identifies some of the overarching rhetorical arguments remodeling promoters used to encourage home improvement. Throughout the postwar era, authorities presented remodeling as an obligation homeowners owed to their nation, their community, and most of all, their family. At the same time, the remodeled house, with more space and amenities, was offered up as the just deserts for a population of a country blessed by Providence and made prosperous through hard work and free enterprise. Trade groups joined with the Federal Civil Defense Administration to argue that clean, well-maintained, and up-to-date homes were essential to the nation's physical survival in the event of nuclear

⁹⁶ Harold W. Berkman and Christopher C. Gilson, "Social Class and Consumer Behavior: A Review for the 70s," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 4:3 (Summer 1976): 652.

⁹⁷ Howard A. Stone, "What Do Your Ads Mean to Consumers?" *Printer's Ink* (April 13, 1956): 21-26.

attack. Consumption on home improvement, to keep the American economic engine running, was likewise considered the duty of all patriotic citizens. Within the family, husbands were to provide up-to-date workspaces for their wives; wives were to create inviting domestic environments to keep their spouses from the bar or bowling alley. Both parents were to ensure that their children had sufficient private space to grow emotionally, socially, and sexually. These social pressures, conveyed by a range of experts in magazine articles, in popular TV programs and films, helped convince many Americans to build an addition, a second bathroom, finish the attic as a teen bedroom, and convert the basement to a recreation room.

Chapter 2, "Settings for Selling," investigates how building product retailers and trade contractors reconfigured their businesses to appeal to the rapidly growing ranks of (largely amateur) remodelers. Hardware stores and lumberyards, as well as plumbing and heating contractors, developed new showrooms meant to disarm customers unaccustomed to shopping in such establishments. These early home improvement centers used modern, supermarket-like layouts of bright, orderly aisles to impart an image of up-to-date efficiency and openness. At the same time, elements such as pine paneling and couches evoked the homey comforts of lounge and living room. Selling environments with explanatory displays and model rooms catered to the customer's senses. The remodeling of building supply stores into home improvement centers functioned as emulative acts, their upgrading meant to serve as a persuasive prompt for residential improvement projects.

The third and forth chapters return to the home interior, specifically the kitchen, to examine the primary rhetorical emphasis of postwar kitchen promotion, that of personalizing the space to fit its primary user. Chapter 3, "A Kitchen for Her," outlines the ways in which remodeling promoters used personalization as a tool to encourage dissatisfaction with one's existing cooking space, propose a dream kitchen

in response. It then looks more closely at how personalization was articulated by designers through reflecting the tastes, habits and body of the housewife. The following chapter, "Look Who's Designing Kitchens," examines how manufacturers and dealers used one selling tool in particular, the miniature kitchen planning kit. These portable sets, with scaled floor and walls and wood or plastic pieces representing counters, cabinets, and heavy appliances, could be easily reconfigured to represent a variety of kitchen layouts. Though developed in the 1930s, they became much more popular with postwar remodeling dealers some of whom presented them as the tool of the new expert (male) kitchen planner. Tacitly contesting the authority of these design authorities, some kitchen manufacturers used the kits to open up kitchen design as a process that any homemaker could undertake. Combined with the housewife's own intuition, the kits were said to ensure a remodeled kitchen that accurately reflected and accommodated her lifestyle. Presentations of the kits in advertisements and brochures were decidedly gendered, emphasizing the toy-like nature of the kits and showing women "playing" with the kit's miniature pieces. Designing a kitchen, women customers were told, could be fun and accessible. Growing consumer interest in home improvement attracted unscrupulous entrepreneurs who promised dramatic makeovers with deals too good to pass up. Chapter 5, "Dupes and Dynamiters," examines the postwar culture of home improvement fraud. Many swindlers practiced what was called the "model home scam." Canvassing door-to-door they sold barbecues, patios, aluminum windows, siding, and mastic paint applications, promising homeowners discounts and commissions in exchange for them passing along referrals and serving as "satisfied customers." Sales pitches featured the alluring rhetoric of transformation. Improvements would convert weekends spent painting into weekends spent relaxing, remake conventional homes into exceptional ones, and change old into new. Some

customers were duped, unwittingly signing second mortgages for substandard work and illusory bonuses; others colluded, falsifying FHA loans and vouching for shoddy installations. While home improvement scams could change the appearance of whole neighborhoods, the mistrust they engendered contributed to larger shifts already underway in the remodeling market toward do-it-yourself, and toward self-service home improvement centers.

An investigation of postwar home improvement through the lenses of consumption, marketing, persuasion, and the complicated interaction of producers, promoters, and consumers, prompts a reconsideration of the American home. Though commonly framed as a site of unchanging solidity and timeless domesticity, the house becomes a site of continual reinvention, where not only the structure itself is serially reworked into something different than it was before, but where the meaning and significance of house and home are constantly open to reinterpretation. Building product manufacturers, magazine publishers, government officials, contractors, and homeowners all preferred novelty and chose it over stasis. At root, then, my study of home improvement reveals deeper national currents about the primacy of the new, a belief in the promise of reinvention, and a desire for our objects to express identity while transcending the passage of time. My contribution to what is finally a growing literature on home improvement, is a focus upon those forces that invited, facilitated, prompted, and pushed homeowners to improve their homes in the time following initial construction.

FIGURES

REMODEL AND REPAIR YOUR HOME FOR BETTER LIVING
WITH TOP-QUALITY MATERIALS FROM THE LIEBER BUILDING MATERIAL STORE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

HOUSE PAINT
385
445

Plywood
Come to Lieber's for a complete stock of beautiful plywood... with plenty, standing ready, to replace old sheetrock and plywood for table tops, etc.

Make Repairs To Your Roof Now Before Winter Sets In
Small cracks, loose joints, broken eaves and leaky rafters are sure to result in hundreds of dollars damage in winter, summer, etc.

Save On ROOFING
You can keep it dry... for less than \$100 per 1000 sq. ft.

LIEBER'S HAVE LUMBER For Every Use
Don't miss out on the best... for every use.

You Can Insulate An Average Home For \$60
Insulate on Radiant Heat... on Glass Windows... on Floors... on Walls...

Tile Means Style
Colorful tile adds new beauty to your kitchen and bathroom. One or two, several ceilings and walls. Easily installed, no dirt or mess, not necessary to remove old plaster. See samples.

Decorate and Remodel
Don't miss out on the best... for every use.

Knotty Pine
21c
3210c

Clear Pine Lumber
21c
3210c

GUTTERS and LEADERS
Check Gutters and Leaders to get your home... water and back piping are really serious matters.

Garage
12
22

SEWER TILE and DRAIN TILE
Lieber's has complete stock of...

Storm Sash and Combination Doors
Protect your home... from all four sides.

Ready-Mix Concrete
Dry Mixed Concrete
Batch portable with excellent... before you mix.

Fencing For Safety
Protect against trespassers and safeguard your family with a new sturdy picket or wire fencing. We have the plans also.

HARDWOOD FLOORING
25.50

LIEBER'S
Plan's a Unique Building and Building Material Store in Your Neighborhood

APOLLO 114 W. Kentucky St., FL. 4-2021
NEW LONDON 42
BIRMINGHAM 4-1274
JACKSON 11
GREENWOOD 42 S. 1

Visit Us Your Neighbors... gladly give you free estimates... Stop in at the store in your neighborhood, you're always welcome!

Figure 0.1. Building material stores provided homeowners with myriad products and suggestions on how to improve their houses from small projects like adding storm doors to major additions. The advertisement also demonstrates the elision of repair and remodeling in popular understanding.

Source: "Kitchens for Profits." *American Lumberman* (September 9, 1950): 126.



Figure 0.2. Word-of-mouth from satisfied customers was an essential vehicle for promoting home improvement desires. The above image, when viewed with “Maga-Scope” glasses provided by the journal, would appear in 3-D.

Source: “Remodeling! The Third dimension of your market.” *Domestic Engineering* (November 1953): 106.

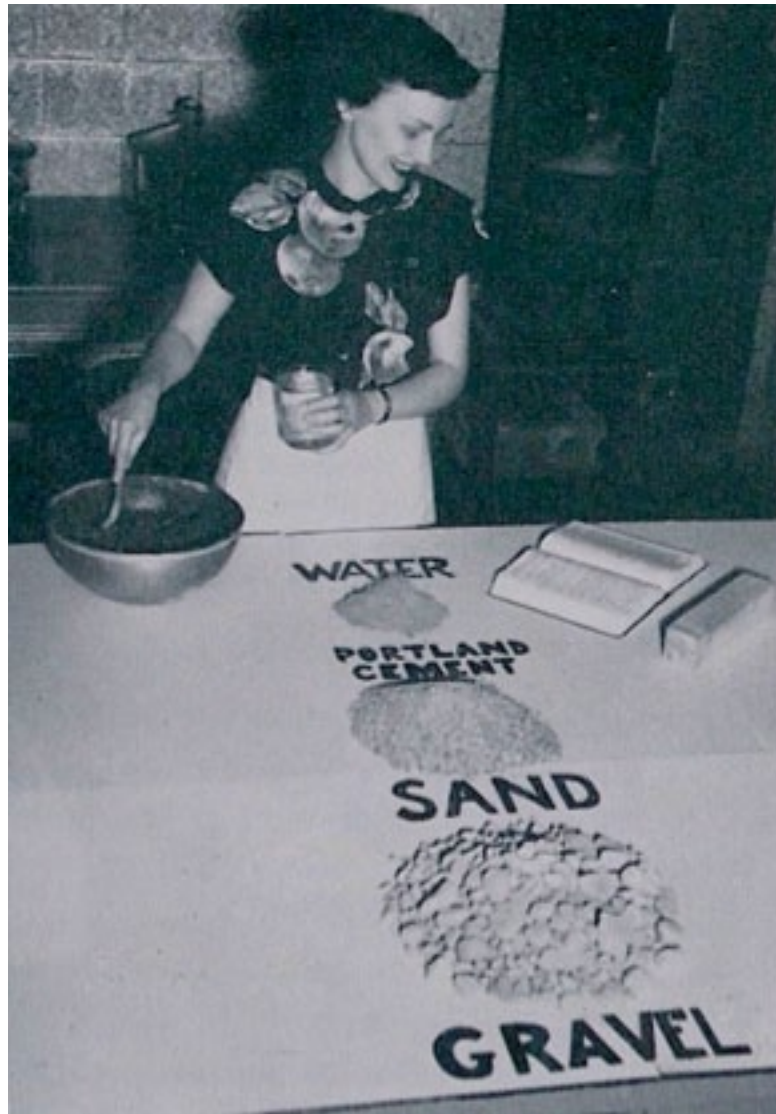


Figure 0.3. As women continued to become primary consumers and household decision makers, promoters sought persuasive strategies that would entice them to consume home improvement. The photo is from a 1955 bank magazine article equating mixing concrete with baking. It assured women readers that “you can whip up your own” batch of concrete for any improvement job. The caption accompanying the image read: “No...take a second look. That’s concrete she’s mixing...not biscuits! But you can see she realizes the importance of following the ‘recipe’ all the same.”

Source: “How to Be a Good Mixer...of Concrete.” *First Federal’s Home Magazine* (Waycross, GA), May 1955, 3.



Figure 0.4. Trade journals like *Domestic Engineering* encouraged readers to diversify their businesses by taking on home improvement work. Surveys and profiles of successful remodeling dealers (real, and here, imagined) illustrated the market's potential.

Source: "The Problem of John Smith" *Domestic Engineering* (Nov. 1953): 113.



Figure 0.5. An interior photograph of the 1950 White House project. Historic wood-work and other features were retained and reinserted in a rebuilt structure. The reconstruction was featured in numerous magazine profiles.

Source: Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Accession Number 71-301,
Photography by Abbie Rowe. <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/photographs/view.php?id=18804>



Figure 0.6. (top). Roy Lichtenstein's "Step-on Can with Leg," 19616, (bottom) Andy Warhol's "Nose Job," 1961. The former plays with narrative imagery as the viewer seeks out changes between the two. The latter comments on the advertising conventions of bodily transformation enacted to produce idealized but ultimately indistinctive human reproductions.

CHAPTER 1 OBLIGATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

"Your growing family, the desire to make your home measure up to today's living standards, the will to be an active participant in improving your neighborhood are all motivating factors in every home improvement program."
— *Ideas for Home Improvements*, National Plan Service, 1962.¹

Throughout the postwar era, home improvement promoters presented remodeling as an obligation that owners needed to undertake for the benefit of their nation, community, family, and themselves. Underpinning this assertion was the established association of homeownership with patriotism and conceptions of the single-family house as a sanctuary from outside forces of conquest and corruption. By fixing and upgrading their homes, Americans were preparing for the travails of a new global conflict while contributing to the national economy. Embracing the latest styles, finishes, and layouts was a path to peer approval. Providing additional space for a growing family ensured harmony among its members and an environment conducive to proper child development. Popular magazines, psychologists, and building material producers and dealers encouraged parents to act on their duty to protect their family—from delinquents, popular culture, foreign aggression—through remodeling consumption. Husbands were to model masculine rectitude while providing the financial means to afford an attractive and spacious home, often upgraded through their own labor. Wives and mothers were to ensure righteous, edifying environments

¹ *Ideas for Home Improvements*. (Chicago: National Plan Service, Inc., 1962), 1.

that uplifted their children and set them on a path toward industry and sobriety.² They were to promptly adopt the latest ideas, products, and materials that promised to make the house an inviting and relaxing haven. Upgraded homes provided the space and time for mothers to extend their nurturing attentions to the broader families of neighborhood and nation. As the president of the League of Women Voters stated in 1952, "A woman who is constructively involved in the affairs of her community invariably builds a better family for America."³

Remodeling boosters sometimes presented these calls as a debt that was owed by parent to child or by homeowner to the State. This was not an owing in monetary terms, but rather a web of mutually acknowledged social responsibilities of contribution and care, similar to what anthropologist David Graeber has labeled "baseline communism."⁴ Most often, home improvement promoters relied upon a softer rhetoric of expectation. They articulated this through example families or case studies in which model parents and children (usually real, but occasionally fictional) were shown improving their dwellings for the sake of spouses, sons and daughters. In 1955 *American Home* magazine profiled a family that built a room where the kids could play without fear of destroying precious furnishings. The author noted that

² This maternal-material obligation was also not new. Angel Kwolek-Folland has examined how in the late 19th century, middle class ideals stipulated that "wife and homemaker provide refined surroundings for her family as an essential part of creating a stable, instructive home environment." Angel Kwolek-Folland, "The Useful What-not and the Ideal of 'Domestic Decoration,'" *Helicon* 8 (1983): 72.

³ Percy Maxim Lee, "The Family in Our Democratic Society," *Journal of Home Economics* 44, no. 7 (1952): 498-501. Elaine Tyler May discusses the postwar suburbanites propensity to found and join local clubs, organizations, and churches in: Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 20.

⁴ According to Graeber, baseline communism (along with equitable exchange and hierarchy) was one of three organizing principles shared by all societies. Baseline communism, which Graeber has also called "everyday communism," is simply the sharing of work for a common goal where financial remuneration is neither appropriate nor expected. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2011), 126.

"Happy results like this don't just happen, though. They were planned by...wise parents whose Seattle home combines beauty with contented kids."⁵ Embedded within such presentations was the assertion that successful, conscientious American parents remodeled for their families. The unexpressed question was "Why don't you?"

If guilty feelings aroused by these claims were insufficient to prompt action, pitches could also present remodeling as a right to be asserted, a reward to be claimed.⁶ Home improvement was what American culture expected of the middle-class homeowner, but it was also something to which the latter should feel entitled. The nation had won the war, husbands put in long hours at the office, wives worked hard to raise strong children, all in a country blessed by Providence with a growing economy fueled by the energy and certitude of free enterprise. As the just deserts of a triumphalist United States, remodeling promoters served up the second bathroom, the expanded kitchen with breakfast nook and dishwasher, the patio, or basement recreation room. Like tobacco and soda advertisers, those marketing remodeling had to convince consumers that such purchases were not a form of pampering. In 1957, *Time* magazine observed, "Every time a 'self-indulgent' product is sold the buyer's guilt feelings must be assuaged by couching the advertising in terms to make the self-indulgence morally acceptable; for example, by saying you deserve candy."⁷ Build that fence or wall, *House Beautiful* told its readers, because "you deserve a chance to

⁵ "Don't Decorate Your Kids Into Delinquency," *American Home* 54 (1955): 63-65.

⁶ Marjorie Garber sees the late 20th century promotion of luxury features (Palladian windows, spiral stairs) for new housing and remodeling projects as likewise reliant upon a rhetoric of desert. Their promotion was similar to "all those 'you deserve it' and 'I'm worth it' ads for status-enhancing consumer items like automobiles and hair-color." Marjorie Garber, *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 128.

⁷ "Psychology and the Ads," *Time* (May 13, 1957): 51-52, 54.

live your life without constant observation."⁸

Duties to family, community, and country were not mutually exclusive and often overlapped. Neighbors usually acknowledged shared responsibility for upholding property values and so maintained their homes also for the sake of those around them.⁹ Buying remodeling products and services helped the family by enhancing the home in which they lived. It also benefitted local businesses and tradespeople that the homeowner patronized, benefits which then filtered upstream to wholesalers and building product manufacturers nationwide. Even the parental obligation to provide for the family could extend beyond parents and offspring. Basements converted into recreation rooms provided space where kids or adults could relax and entertain without disrupting others. But rec rooms also assumed specific patriotic functions, as fallout shelters and gathering places for civic events such as scout troop or 4-H meetings.

A coalition of building product manufacturers, retail dealers, and civil defenders presented home improvement as a means for Americans to fulfill their patriotic duty of Cold War nuclear preparedness. Through a conflation of patriotism and the single-family home that was already in place, remodeling promoters and social commentators told American parents of their obligation to be ready if the sirens

⁸ "Do the Neighbors Know Your Business?" *House Beautiful* (February 1950), 32.

⁹ Remodeling pitches that promised increased property values were irresistible to postwar dealers and contractors. If the promoter could persuade clients that their house would be worth more after the work, than the work seemed free. According to *Changing Times* magazine, "many home improvement contractors confidently assure you that 'this job will add twice its cost to the value of your home.'" "Will It Pay to Fix Up the House?," *Changing Times* (April 1961): 7-10. A remodeling sales kit published by the trade journal *Domestic Engineering* encouraged its readership of heating and plumbing contractors to "sell the idea that 'It pays 5 ways to modernize—in health, comfort, efficiency, economy and increased property value.'" "Requests Pour in for Remodeling Sales Kit," *Domestic Engineering* (April 1953): 81.

sounded and the detonation flashed in the sky. The best way to make ready was to update the home with new shelters, modern, uncluttered layouts, and new paint jobs. A close reading of the 1954 promotional film *The House in the Middle*, demonstrates how home improvement boosters capitalized upon national anxieties over atomic attack to sell products. By upgrading the home and improving its appearance, postwar families were (so promoters claimed) also protecting their communities and the nation as a whole.

Remodeling rhetoric commonly argued that parents were duty-bound to optimize the spatial layout of their home for all family members. Appeals to rework domestic interiors reveal a postwar ambivalence over the closeness of the nuclear family and attitudes toward individual privacy. Remodeling could make families closer by separating them. The contradictions of a postwar culture that celebrated family togetherness and individual privacy, civic engagement and social retreat, were embodied in the recreation room. Ultimately, recreation rooms in converted attics, basements, and spare bedrooms were a locus of postwar obligation-inspired home improvement. The rec room demonstrates the breadth of ways in which postwar American culture called upon citizens to fulfill their obligations at the micro level (making sure children had space to be children) and the macro level (ensuring the survival of the nation). Promotional literature encouraging the conversion of bare basements and attic spaces into rec rooms relied upon the same rhetorical devices used to convince homeowners to build basement shelters or paint their house. All of these pitches assumed that it was the homeowner's responsibility to better themselves, their spouse and children, their community and country through remodeling.

Patriotism and the Single Family House

From the founding of the United States domestic architecture served as a metaphor for the nation. Politicians and intellectuals argued that this political house required regular maintenance and upgrading to best serve its citizen occupants.¹⁰ Homeownership, improvement, and patriotism were reciprocal acts. A 1932 report from the President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership claimed, "Periodic reconditioning [of the home] is necessary to the safety, health, and comfort of a family. Also it is universally recognized as an obligation due from any property owner to his family, his neighbors, neighborhood, and community."¹¹ During World War II, the American home became part of a home front, a domestic battlefield where victory gardens and resourceful conservation and maintenance would help beat the Axis powers and ensure a smooth return of soldiers and prosperity.¹²

During its first two decades, Americans increasingly turned to the single-family home as a source of financial stability and independence, and an antidote to an unpredictable job market.¹³ Civic leaders sought to hasten the practice. Herbert Hoover, first in the Commerce Department, became a central advocate of homeownership, backing

¹⁰ Faherty writes, "In the absence of ancient customs or structures, the foundational unit of community construction, the house, became the means by which the nation conceptualized its own history." Duncan Faherty. *Remodeling the Nation: The Architecture of American Identity 1776-1858*. (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), 6.

¹¹ Sources as early as the 1932 president's report cited below framed home improvement activities as a homeowner's responsibility to his community, to maintain property values, to maintain aesthetic standards, to ward off crime, and reduce delinquency. *Housing and the Community-Home Repair and Remodeling* (Washington, DC: The President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1932), 235.

¹² For a survey of wartime obligations American culture imposed on women, see: Melissa A. McEuen. *Making War, Making Women: Femininity and Duty on the American Home Front, 1941-1945*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

¹³ Becky Nicolaides, "My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965" in *The Suburb Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

programs such as the "Own Your Own Home" and "Better Homes in America" movements. Passage of the 1934 National Housing Act with mortgage financing assistance through the Federal Housing Administration cemented government support of owner-occupied single-family homes.¹⁴ Partly due to these initiatives, homeownership increased by over fifty percent between 1940 and 1950. In 1953, 60 percent of homes were owner-occupied.¹⁵ The 1944 G.I. Bill, which opened homeownership to a large portion of the population, was premised on the idea that citizens who possessed their own dwellings were more economically mobile, loyal, and family-focused. Levittown scholar Barbara Kelly has pointed out that homeownership was a symbol of middle-class status, and that "de facto membership in the middle class brought with it the fulfillment of the republican ideal."¹⁶

Politicians, cultural commentators, and remodeling promoters in the postwar years adapted earlier meanings of the single-family home to fit a new national imperative, namely the confrontation between Soviet communism and American capitalism.¹⁷ Historians have since explored the myriad ways in which the Cold War seeped into every facet of life, especially housing.¹⁸ Photo essays in *Life* and other

¹⁴ LeAnn Lands, "Be a Patriot, Buy a Home: Re-imagining Home Owners and Home Ownership in Early 20th Century Atlanta," *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 4 Summer (2008): 943-965.

¹⁵ "Remodeling! The Third Dimension of Your Market," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1953), 106.

¹⁶ Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (New York: State University of New York, 1993), 161.

¹⁷ The Cold War was not the first time in American history that domestic improvement activities and rhetoric were connected to an international conflict, or the threat of it. In 1918, less than a year after the United States entered World War I, civic and business leaders, as well as architects, artists, and interior designers inaugurated a national better homes movement in New York City. One of its early leaders established home improvement as a patriotic act that would strengthen the nation on the battlefield and on the home front. He stated, "Better homes make better home defenders." "Plan Home Improvement: New York to Be the Centre of Nation-Wide Movement," *New York Times* (January 28, 1918), 5.

¹⁸ Three of the best regarded cultural histories of Cold War are: Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North

magazines helped situate the struggle as one defending the American home. They depicted the daily routines of wives and children of American Cold Warriors (like Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and soldiers fighting the Korean War) secure in the domestic realm preserving the home while men ventured out into the world to assure its survival.¹⁹

U.S. leaders expressed consternation that the housing industry, despite strides made since 1945, seemed unable to rectify a ongoing housing shortage that threatened to undermine claims that capitalism best met human needs. A majority of postwar Americans, particularly veterans and those from the lower class supported a vigorous governmental response to the housing crisis, including the creation of public housing on New Deal era models. Concern for such sentiments prompted conservative politicians and representatives of the real estate, banking, and building industries to speak out for private homeownership and against government-sponsored public housing. Congress held five months of hearings chaired by Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1947 and 1948 during which the single-family home was trumpeted as a symbol of free enterprise.²⁰ At the hearings, conservatives branded public housing supporters as communist sympathizers harboring a secret agenda to socialize the

Carolina Press, 1994)., Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era.*, and Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

¹⁹ According to Wendy Kozol, readers considered such photo essays especially credible “because they purport to depict realistically the events on which they are reporting.” Kozol, Wendy. “‘Good Americans’: Nationalism and Domesticity in Life Magazine, 1945-1960.” In *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism*. Edited by John E. Bodnar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 245.

²⁰ Chapter 8 of Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, Elizabeth Ewen and Linda Gordon, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) examines the McCarthy hearings in detail. See especially, pp. 87-105.

American economy.²¹

Anti-urban attitudes as old as the country itself underpinned attacks upon any housing policy that was not based on private homeownership. A host of postwar films, television programs, novels, and newspaper reports reinforced what many saw as a defining American suspicion of the city and the concept of renting. Apartments were owned by others and thus could not be customized. They also evoked the tenement and European housing models that Americans should not be emulating. Rental housing was impermanent, suitable only for transients who had no stake in local affairs. Apartment dwellers were peripheral.²² City residents were called "cliff-dwellers" as though part of an aboriginal tribe inhabiting an uncivilized wilderness.²³ Governmental policies reinforced existing racial divisions within urban neighborhoods and suburbs, marking the former as predominantly African-American, proscribing the latter as almost exclusively white.²⁴

Questions of patriotism and loyalty infused postwar life; anti-communists saw Soviet agents and fellow travelers infiltrating all levels of American government and culture. The House Committee on Un-American Activities targeted Hollywood in the

²¹ Levitt, McCarthy and others were untroubled by the contradiction that the Federal government provided enormous support and subsidy to the home building industry through FHA loans and other incentives.

²² This is alluded to in Season 4 (2010) of the AMC television drama *Mad Men* when the main character, 1950s advertising executive, Don Draper, moves to a small and dark Manhattan apartment after separating from his wife, children, and their suburban New York white Colonial Revival house.

²³ The term is used in the 1948 film *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* in reference to Manhattanites.

²⁴ The editors of the *Suburban Reader*, summarized this process, "By defining white suburbs as "good" and minority neighborhoods as "bad," the federal government helped codify the racial segmentation of metropolitan space. These federal standards not only reinforced existing patterns of segregation but also extended them into the future. Access to federal assistance-increasingly the ticket to suburbia for Americans of moderate means-was denied to people of color and the poor, well into the 1960s. By thus linking race to suburban access, the state played a crucial role in racializing metropolitan space." Nicolaides, *The Suburb Reader*, 4.

late 1940s, deeming films with social commentaries subversive and blacklisting actors, writers, directors suspected of disloyalty. The 1948 film *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* depicts Americans' expectations for living space evolved in the postwar era. Catherine Jurca has argued that the movie was a defensive move by a jittery and financially imperiled postwar film industry to drum up positive publicity and reassert its patriotic credentials. Through the film Hollywood articulated its support of the American Dream achieved through homeownership. The Blandings family's quest for a suitable home normalized the detached house as a solution to the housing crisis and aligned the movie making industry with conservative politicians and homebuilders.

In a 1948 magazine profile, the builder merchant William Levitt famously claimed, "No man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist. He has too much to do."²⁵ Levitt implied that homeownership kept Americans busy with improvements and other work that solidified their identity as American citizens with a vested interest in capitalism.²⁶ How did home improvement fit into this Cold War articulation of the single-family home as bastion of American values? McCarthy,

²⁵ Eric Larabee, "The Six Thousand Houses That Levitt Built," *Harper's*, no. 197 (1948): 84.

²⁶ Ironically, the critics of mass suburban housing developments like Levittown considered them symbols of communism more than capitalism. John Keats' *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956) eviscerated suburban conformity represented by identical homes. He described "whole square miles of identical boxes...spreading like gangrene...developments conceived in error, nurtured by greed, corroding everything they touch." In the book's fictional suburb Rolling Knolls residents lived in "vast communistic, female barracks. This communism . . . began with the obliteration of the individualistic house and self-sufficient neighborhood, and from there on, the creation of mass-produced human beings as the night follows the day." The first Keats quote is reproduced in: Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States: The Suburbanization of the United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3. The second is found in: Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, Elizabeth Ewen, and Linda Gordon. *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 61.

merchant builders, and the real estate industry rarely mentioned remodeling at the time (in part, because while it addressed the poor state of existing housing stock, home improvement did not create new units that ameliorated the housing crisis). Instead remodeling fit into the wider rhetoric of individualism and resourcefulness that it was every private American citizen's duty to embrace.

Home improvement was an expression of private enterprise. It showed the individual taking personal initiative. FHA Title I loans aside, it was government encouraged, but not government operated. Expanding and upgrading existing homes raised Americans' standard of living and further distanced them from those on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Up-to-date homes were symbolic markers of how capitalist consumer society successfully provided for its citizens. The US Government and partner corporations exported these assumptions to Europe and the rest of the world as part of a larger propaganda campaign. According to a Marshall Plan official, the project championed a system "based on widespread ownership, diffusion of initiative, decision and enterprise and an ever-widening distribution of its benefits."²⁷

The postwar focus on the single family home as both American totem and ideological battleground reached its rhetorical apogee with what came to be called the "Kitchen Debates." The 1958 discussion between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took place within an American model home built for a trade exhibition in Moscow. Nixon argued that the suburban house and its kitchen and appliances were products of a dynamic economic system responsive to the needs and desires of American consumers. The kitchen equaled freedom for the

²⁷ Quoted in: Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design*, 124.

culture that produced it and the housewife who used it. The exchange demonstrated how the Cold War was largely fought for world opinion, and illustrated American faith in the physical home as an enabler of happiness.²⁸

Back in the United States, the remodeling industry embraced Cold War metaphors of confrontation and nuclear awe. *Domestic Engineering* told its readers, "Good remodeling jobs...are like the atomic bomb...they start a chain reaction," and "the contractor who gets off to a good start in remodeling will see his sales mushroom."²⁹ The same journal anticipated the arrival to market of a domestic nuclear-powered boiler that would replace conventional heating systems.³⁰ In this environment, the home improvement sales force experienced a rhetorical militarization. To building industry executives, World War II demonstrated the potential of intensive training to convert large numbers of people into specialists in short time. Industry could function the same way. Remodeling salesmen became soldiers engaged in the patriotic act of selling. Industry selected those with no previous knowledge of the field and "by intensive training, they mold and form these men into highly efficient sales specialists."³¹ Their pitches were called "ammunition." Sales representatives within a firm were encouraged to compete with each other so that the spirit of American competitiveness could increase sales and inspire a natural compulsion toward self-improvement.³²

²⁸ Ruth Oldenziel, and Karin Zachmann. "Kitchens As Technology and Politics: An Introduction." In *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 1-29.

²⁹ "Remodeling Is Like a Chain Reaction!" *Domestic Engineering* (November 1953): .

³⁰ "Atomic Heating: Is It in Your Future?" *Domestic Engineering* (July 1955): 86-89.

³¹ "Selling the Space Utilization Package," *American Lumberman* (September 10, 1949): 120.

³² "Amusement Rooms," *American Lumberman* (September 9, 1950): 130.

The patriotic response to the existential threat of world communist domination was the sale and consumption of domesticity. And as William Levitt suggested, it was not just the purchase of a single-family home that was patriotic, but what homeowners did with the house after buying it. Buying new appliances, putting on additions, and finishing attics and basements were assertions of allegiance to American capitalism. Homeowners did not undertake remodeling projects with the primary motive of expressing their patriotism. Yet, the characterization of home improvement as a duty to the nation surely helped justify such purchases. Improving their homes with specific features and finishes owners were taking the first fortifying steps against potential Soviet aggression.

Home Improvement as Civil Defense

The possibility that American houses could be subjected to atomic attack became real in 1949 with the Soviet Union's first nuclear test detonation. This new vulnerability undermined established notions of the home as a place of security and stability. Long-range bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles and a growing knowledge of fallout's effects left nowhere beyond the enemy's reach. The dwelling itself could become a weapon, an atomic pressure wave transforming walls and windows into lethal shards and splinters. Yet at the same time, government and nuclear strategists' calls for home preparedness bolstered symbolic representations of the home as refuge from a hostile world.

In the early 1950s, the federal government initiated a civil defense program to prepare Americans for a nuclear attack on their homeland. Hampered by lack of coordination, consistency, and clarity, the civil defense programs alternately espoused

mass evacuation, mass community shelters, and private shelters alongside calls for general individual preparedness. Over the next decade, experts acknowledged that federal efforts were insufficient and unlikely to include a directly funded defense construction program. As a result, many called for a national policy that emphasized self-help rather than government leadership. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* noted that with this approach, "the problem of civil defense transforms to 'home defense,' and the citizen must look to his own security." Authorities evoked traditional American ideals of frontier individualism and resourcefulness. One administrator stated:

We advocate this, the self-help program. That's nothing new. For instance, back in the Indian age our forebears, when they built their homes, also provided a fortress. In 1958 the American people in their own home should provide themselves protection from radioactive fallout. We give the guidance and the direction.³³

Privatizing civil defense shifted responsibility for protecting the family from the government to the family itself. Husbands and wives as civil defenders shouldered obligations equal to those borne by active members of the armed forces. As historian Laura McEnaney observed, "The front lawn was now the front line. Atomic age vulnerability translated into new responsibility. Citizens had to think of themselves as an integral part of a military mobilization even more than they had during World War

³³ Ralph E. Lapp, "Fallout and Home Defense," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* XV, no. 5 (1959): 187-191.

II, for they were now vulnerable as never before."³⁴

The central task that civil defenders instructed homeowners to take on was the construction of a shelter within their house or on their property. For a brief period in the mid-1950s, fallout shelter mania swept American consumer culture. Sears, Montgomery Ward, and other companies sold prefabricated units, magazines featured stories of honeymoons spent in shelters, and experts told families to improvise secure spaces in their basements.³⁵ Despite the flood of exhortations, authorities acknowledged that few homeowners were likely to go to the trouble and expense of building a full shelter that could effectively protect against initial blast effects. Instead, the author of the *Bulletin* piece quoted above advised the establishment of a more basic sandbag and concrete block "basement shelter shielded by dense material."³⁶

With the Cold War heating up in the early 1960s, the press described a new enthusiasm for shelter construction motivated by a sense of parental responsibility. Between the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, a United Press International article (datelined "Suburbia, U.S.A.") noted how American mothers and fathers were beginning to take seriously the job of protecting their children from a nuclear strike. In the author's neighborhood, "One family down the street has decided definitely to build a backyard shelter. They have three small daughters and the father decided it simply was his duty to do everything possible to insure that they and their mother have the

³⁴ Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 70.

³⁵ The shelter phenomenon has received extensive attention from historians. See: David Monteyne, *Fallout Shelter: Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Lapp, "Fallout and Home Defense," 189.

best possible chance of survival."³⁷ Constructed inside or outside the house, these shelters were often presented as multi-functional home improvements (Figure 1.1). According to Sarah Lichtman, "shelter advocates...promoted the do-it-yourself fallout shelter as an additional space that could enhance the value of the home," easily converted during periods of "all clear" into a wine cellar, workshop, guest room, or playroom for children.³⁸

Shelter construction was just one of ways Cold War Americans were to make ready for Soviet attack. Throughout the period, vigilance and preparedness were the watchwords of survival. Preparedness encompassed a range of, at times, conflicting obligations that politicians, civil defense authorities, popular magazines, and manufacturers imposed upon homeowners, from constructing shelters and stocking pantries to understanding the effects of fallout, learning first aid, and planning evacuation routes.³⁹ In its 1954 film *The House in the Middle*, the National Clean Up, Paint Up, Fix Up Bureau proposed another way to prepare.⁴⁰

Established in 1912 by the National Paint, Varnish, and Lacquer Association, the Clean Up, Paint Up, Fix Up Bureau had previously undertaken various civic improvement campaigns intended to reduce fire hazards in built up areas, mitigate

³⁷ Jack V. Fox, "Families Think Seriously About Nuclear Protection," *Lodi (Calif.) News-Sentinel* (November 21, 1961): 4.

³⁸ Sarah A. Lichtman, "Do-It-Yourself Security: Safety, Gender, and the Home Fallout Shelter in Cold War America," *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 1 (2006): 45.

³⁹ A 1963 Office of Civil Defense educational film stated, "We owe it to ourselves, our families, and our country to know how to protect ourselves from fallout. Our survival could depend on how well we are prepared to meet this threat." *About Fallout*. (Washington, DC: United States Office of Civil Defense, 1963). <https://archive.org/details/AboutFal1963>.

⁴⁰ *The House in the Middle*. Motion Picture. (Washington, DC: National Clean Up-Paint Up-Fix Up Bureau and Federal Civil Defense Administration, 1954) https://archive.org/details/0844_House_in_the_Middle_The_10_14_07_24

slum conditions, beautify neighborhoods, and, of course, sell paint. Well-maintained communities and homes, the bureau argued, were less combustible and slowed the spread of fire. Teaming up with the Federal Civil Defense Administration (the primary governmental agency charged with ensuring American preparedness), the Bureau updated its argument for a new era.⁴¹ According to *The House in the Middle*, a terrible new force threatened unimproved, unmaintained American homes: the heat wave generated in a nuclear detonation. The film's narrator noted, "The house that is neglected, may be the house that is doomed...in the atomic age." By extension this ominous fate also awaited neglected communities and indeed the entire nation should it remain complacent.

The film presented a series of nuclear tests at the Nevada Proving Grounds in which small wood-frame structures meant to model single-family homes in various stages of upkeep were exposed to the overpressure and heat waves following a nuclear explosion (Figure 1.2). As footage illustrated the impact of these forces, the narrator celebrated the durability and resistance of the newly painted, well cared for version, while deriding the unkempt, poorly treated buildings' vulnerability and susceptibility to fire. The final test featured three model houses lined up facing Ground Zero. On the left was an "eyesore" with unpainted wood and trash in the yard; on the right, a partially neglected structure with faded paint and rotten clapboard siding. The house in the middle had a new white paint job, sound clapboard, and a clear yard. Guess which

⁴¹ This was just one of many partnerships the FCDA established with private organizations and trade groups. The agency also worked with the National Concrete Masonry Association to encourage home shelter construction.

one survived.⁴²

The Civil Defense Agency and its partners developed films, books, pamphlets, and exhibitions that utilized what were called "emotion management strategies." They sought to forge a more disciplined and unified American populace by balancing two feelings, 1) fear of nuclear annihilation, and 2) optimism that the average citizen could survive an attack if they took proper measures.⁴³ The goal was to stoke sufficient worry to prompt action and support of government initiatives but to avoid instilling in the population a debilitating sense of despair. Alternating appeals to fear and optimistic reassurance underpinned *The House in the Middle*. From the voiceover in the opening shot counting down to a mushroom cloud, the movie preyed on public anxiety over the very real possibility that nuclear war would come to their community. With a fetishistic deliberateness the blasts and their effects on the test structures were shown repeatedly at normal and "stop motion" speeds. The deep bass rumbling of the explosions over a soundtrack crescendo of string instruments and horns emphasized the awesome power of the detonations. In one scene a technician picked the charred, twisted remains of a baby carriage from one of the deteriorated test houses. Its message was clear, "Are you going to allow this to happen to your child?"

⁴² The results of these tests were also used in newspaper articles to argue the fire-resistant capabilities of newly painted houses. See for example: "Smoothly Painted Surface Aids a Home Resist Fire," *Hamilton [Ohio] Journal - The Daily News* (July 12, 1955): 18.

⁴³ For a discussion of the Federal Civil Defense Agency's and other government offices' efforts to manage Cold War emotions, see: chapter 3: "Ideological and Spiritual Motivation," in: Lori L. Bogle, *The Pentagon's Battle for the American Mind: The Early Cold War* (TAMU Press, 2004). Laura McEnaney has written "Planners wanted civil defense to look to outsiders like a taut domestic defense system that mirrored the regular military, so they designed a program that mimicked some of the military's regimentation. At the same time, however, they wanted citizens to see preparedness as benign, easy to practice, so they crafted an approach that make it look like a decidedly nonmilitary activity that was more about family togetherness than nuclear readiness. This dual personality of civil defense made it a peculiar fusion of Cold War military ethics and idealized domesticity." *McEnaney, Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties*, 5.

Yet the film offered an alternative to nuclear holocaust fueled by the "kindling" of unimproved homes. By organizing Clean-Up, Paint-Up, Fix-Up campaigns that cleared clutter and litter, by planting flowers, by undertaking those long delayed repair projects, and most importantly by upgrading and painting homes could individual residences and whole towns be spared (Figure 1.3). It was a message that adroitly blended patriotic duty, civic activism, and personal responsibility. It was all the more potent as it tied such projects to the imagery and symbolism of that bulwark of American independence, the single-family home.

Policy makers saw the rhetorical linking of Cold War and single-family home as a way to mobilize the private citizen. Through the home, this new international struggle (which leaders feared Americans would consider abstract and distant) became physical and local. Providing a means of tangibly responding to the conflict could help allay concerns that citizens facing the possibility of nuclear destruction would succumb to hopeless apathy. Through home improvement, the regular American could play the part of civilian Cold Warrior, modern-day Minuteman. As the narrator in the film argued, "These civil defense tests have proven how important upkeep is to our houses and towns. Now it's time for us, the people, to take decisive action."⁴⁴ No doubt some also saw painting and improvement as an assertive response, preferable to that of digging subterranean shelters, practices that skeptics considered cowardly. (US

⁴⁴ Advocates of nuclear survivability, had to take care not seem so confident that they seemed to invite the possibility of nuclear war or present it as an inevitability. A letter to the editor in the November 3, 1961 issue of *Life* magazine, responding to an article about surviving a nuclear attack stated "However little premeditated, your endeavor to reconcile your readers to a nuclear war as a practical undertaking surpasses in irresponsibility anything hitherto attempted in the history of the American Press. You are helping to kindle the holocaust."

Senator Brien McMahon, for one, remarked in 1950, "[We] are not going underground for anybody...[to] make moles of ourselves.")⁴⁵ Indeed shelter construction, which would have brought little if any new revenue to the film's sponsors, was not mentioned once in *The House in the Middle*.

Home improvement as civil defense made the family not only responsible for their own survival, but kept the focus of that effort squarely on the individual and on individual action. Constructing a basement or backyard shelter, painting, replacing rotting clapboard, and redecorating to reduce clutter, were jobs done by family members to protect other family members.⁴⁶ Large-scale community shelters never received the same attention accorded to projects aimed at saving mom, dad, and the children. Cleaning, painting, and fixing one's home worked, however, to connect one's personal experience to the larger narrative of national defense. The Cold War was rife with rhetoric conflating the personal with the national, motivated by prevailing tropes of duty, loyalty, patriotism, and containment. Alan Nadel has examined how such ideas, which through repetition seem "natural," "true" and "common sense," "performed the ideological task of linking the individual's sense of self and the story of one's life—to a national history."⁴⁷ It was expected that preparedness—through making the home more secure and resilient—would ease personal anxieties about the horrors of nuclear war and embed the individual actor in a larger struggle against

⁴⁵ Quoted in: Dee Garrison, *Bracing for Armageddon: Why Civil Defense Never Worked* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 61.

⁴⁶ *The House in the Middle*, at least, avoided the gendered division of labor characteristic of home shelter discussions. Advertisements and articles discussing shelter construction had men building (and rebuilding) while women (as informed consumers) stocked the shelter and attended to other domestic duties. See: Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 101.

⁴⁷ Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 8.

communism.

The approach to domestic vigilance that the National Paint, Varnish, and Lacquer Association advocated was based on expert thinking about how victory would be measured if the Cold War led to a nuclear exchange. Strategists and politicians argued that the winner of a U.S.-Soviet war would be the country where a greater percentage of the population, physical infrastructure, and governmental and military capacity remained after the last bomb fell.⁴⁸ Arguments for survivability, though, were often focused on the physical structure of buildings and cities more than their inhabitants. The same was true with *The House in the Middle*, which glossed over the effects of a nuclear blast and pressure wave upon human inhabitants, as well as the longer-term impact of radioactive fallout (though the latter was still not fully understood in the early 1950s). The house in the middle may survive thanks to its paint job and history of fastidious attention and improvement, but the prognosis for those who lived and took refuge inside was less positive.⁴⁹

The House in the Middle argued that the reality of Soviet nuclear bombers presented an entirely new motivation for home improvement and upkeep, and that such projects were the duty of all citizens. Yet its anti-urban bias excluded millions of

⁴⁸ Campaigns to ensure survivability (or at least the perception that survival was a possibility), from "Duck and Cover" child education efforts to the marking of evacuation routes and construction of backyard shelters, also had the aim of gaining a tactical victory without nuclear exchange. American strategists reasoned that the Soviet Union was less likely to strike first and more likely to back down from confrontations if they thought American defensive strength would render a first strike indecisive.

⁴⁹ The government's announcements of the survivability of nuclear war were known to be overly optimistic. *The House in the Middle's* thesis, that post attack fires could be more destructive than the initial blast, and that maintaining and improving one's home could mitigate that destruction, received partial confirmation in a 1963 article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Yet, in its discussion of defenses against firestorms, the piece argued not for painting and clutter-clearance, but for building basement and backyard bomb shelters. A. Broido, "Mass Fires Following Nuclear Attack," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 16, no. 10 (1960): 409-413.

those citizens.⁵⁰ The film purportedly depicted conditions in a town "on the outer fringe of an attack directed at a nearby city." In other words, the suburbs. Urban centers, as presumable primary targets, were written off entirely. Stereotypical markers of urban decay—"alleyways," "slum areas"—were described as representative settings where nuclear firestorms would most easily take hold (Figure 1.4). A prejudice against the city is especially prominent in the film's focus on order. This was the subtextual message of clean up campaigns since the bureau's inception—the way city dwellers lived, without attention to order or aesthetics was unhealthy, unsafe, and ultimately un-American. In a nuclear era, suburban homes, unlike city dwellings, could be saved by through their continual maintenance and improvement.⁵¹

Like *The House in the Middle*, other civil defense projects tended to ignore inhabitants of America's urban cores, assume single-family homeownership, and equate untidiness with a selfishly irresponsible lack of vigilance. One 1951 brochure answered the question "How should a house be prepared?" with the response "Starting right now you should go in for "fire-proof housekeeping." Don't let trash pile up around your house and always keep it in covered containers."⁵² Critics in and outside the Kennedy administration slammed the brochure for focusing exclusively on the suburbs and affluent areas. John Kenneth Galbraith wrote that it was for "the people

⁵⁰ That *The House in the Middle* used earlier arguments for preparedness and relied on the rhetoric of urban renewal and slum cleanup is not surprising. Many aspects of civil defense persuasion worked by deploying past activities and ways of thinking to normalize civil defense as a continuation of past practices, e.g., stocking the larder, frontier individual preparedness.

⁵¹ Not incidentally, portrayals of urban decay and the urban homeowner (the poor, blacks) as unpatriotic in their disregard for domestic presentation were part of a broader justification for interwar and postwar slum clearance and urban renewal projects.

⁵² Federal Civil Defense Administration, *Survival Under Atomic Attack* (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), 14.

who have individual houses with basements in which basement or lean-to fallout shelters can be built. There is no design for civilians who live in wooden three-deckers, tenements, low cost apartments, or other congested areas..."⁵³ When proposed as a means to survive nuclear attack, such advice compromised the legitimacy of civil defense in general. Publications asking citizens to clean up litter or paint their homes undoubtedly seemed foolishly unrealistic to many. Most dangerously, such guidance tipped the equilibrium between optimism and fear toward the latter among substantial portions of the population. Establishing civil defense as an almost entirely individual (and individually-funded) obligation left no space for optimism among those who had no control over their rented apartments or could not afford new paint jobs, maintenance, or shelter construction. In Galbraith's words such advice "would alarm without giving hope."⁵⁴

Improving Homes and Improving Families

The single family home was a primary venue through which postwar parental obligations to the family were articulated. As in the past, cultural commentators often conflated the physical home with the family. Mother and father were obliged to establish a domestic setting filled with love, stability, and nurturing. The physically sound, appropriately laid out, and up-to-date home was both the prerequisite and the facilitator of these conditions. A majority of those responding to a 1952 survey considered good housing more important than clothing or vacations. Two-thirds

⁵³ Quoted in: Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 29. Galbraith's critique of the biases embedded in civil defense programs was grounded in politics as well as humanitarianism. The Democrat referred to those attended to by civil defense as Republicans, those who were ignored as Democrats.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30.

answered that they "agree" or "agree very much" with the statement, "It is more important to have good housing than to give children a college education."⁵⁵

Social scientists and psychologists joined architects and designers in seeing the home's physical layout and appearance contributing to how a family functioned. The introduction to a 1969 study remarked, "The house, as the physical environment in which the ebb and flow of family development takes place, may well play an assertive, though silent, part in the establishment of family living patterns through the accommodations for privacy and the interaction which it provides."⁵⁶ Experts argued that the house could mean the difference between a tranquil, fulfilling, and happy family life and one marked by rancor, tension, and sadness. This faith in physical determinism had given birth to numerous social and architectural movements including twentieth century Modernism.⁵⁷

The Harmonious, Friction-Free Family

Good housing was increasingly defined in the postwar era as that which reduced friction among family members. When families in new, often diminutive, suburban housing grew they felt a need for more space. The forty-hour workweek and longer vacations meant that parents, daughters and sons spent increasing amounts of leisure

⁵⁵ Glenn H. Beyer, "Home Selection and Home Management," *Marriage and Family Living* 17, no. 2 (1955): 143-151. Granted this was at a period when just over 10% of the population possessed bachelor's degrees.

⁵⁶ Ruth Smith, Donna Beth Downer, Mildred T. Lynch, and Mary Winter. "Privacy and Interaction Within the Family As Related to Dwelling Space." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 31, no. 3 (1969): 559.

⁵⁷ Determinism also served politicians and planners in justifying slum clearance and later, urban renewal efforts. Karen Franck treats the rise and fall of determinism in environment-behavior research, in Karen A. Franck, "Exorcising the Ghost of Physical Determinism." *Environment and Behavior* 16, no. 4 (1984): 411-435.

time together. In 1958 *Life* lamented that "little houses, rasping nerves," were a universal peeve of postwar homeowners. The magazine quoted a Denver housewife who supposedly spoke for others when she complained, "Living on top of one another has destroyed our enjoyment of each other as a family. Unless you have space and privacy you can't live decently."⁵⁸

Reducing tension and increasing the harmony within the house was primarily achieved through spatial expansion. Children were separated into separate rooms, a second bathroom was added, and play spaces were introduced or enlarged. Master bedrooms became living room-like places for adults to escape children and their noise.⁵⁹ The move toward increased spatial separation was furthered by a growing emphasis on individuality and privacy in American culture. Reducing family friction by increasing privacy seems to contradict the typical characterization of postwar nuclear families as close and cohesive. Historian Clifford Clark observed that the 1950s middle class model presupposed fulfillment chiefly within the family unit. "Happiness came from raising healthy, independent kids, decorating the home to one's own tastes, and sitting back in the evening with other family members and relaxing in

⁵⁸ "Little Houses, Rasping Nerves," *Life* (September 15, 1958): 64-65. *McCall's* magazine quoted an even more exasperated homemaker who said, "The bigger the children, the louder the noise. I'd just like to dig a hole in the cellar." "100 Housewives Speak Their Minds," *McCall's* (March 1958): 140.

⁵⁹ Before the war had ended, the *Ladies' Home Journal* suggested that its readers develop what today would be called a master suite. In it, a couple comfortable chairs, and a table for lamp, reading materials, and radio supplemented the typical bedroom furnishings—bed, dresser, and dressing table—. Such spaces carved from an upstairs sleeping porch or a disused maid's room, "make an excellent escape room for parents whose children need to use the family living room for dates and frequent get-togethers with friends. Almost any size bedroom can be rearranged to make space for just such a comfortable grouping where one can read, study or rest, undisturbed by the clamor of family activities below." Henrietta Murdock, "Privacy for Parents," *Ladies' Home Journal* 61 (May 1944): 150.

front of the new television set."⁶⁰ A centripetal family life was reinforced by the widespread adoption of open plans in new houses, and the reduction of ground floor partitions in existing houses. The kitchen was no longer to be isolated by doors and walls, but opened up to the main living area. Flexible kitchen-living-dining rooms were to be places of communion, where work and play merged, where eating, entertainment, and relaxation were shared activities.⁶¹

The open plan predated the postwar nuclear family, and was adopted for stylistic and economic reasons, as well as the desire for an informal and flexible home environment. Yet it is conceivable that the cultural imperative of family togetherness, combined with increasingly open domestic layouts stimulated calls for the provision of private space within the home. Before the war, the family and its home sealed individuals from the outside world. In the postwar era, it was privacy from each other within the home, that Americans sought and that experts asserted was vitally important.⁶²

In a 1960 paper titled "Resolving Family Conflicts," sociologist Robert Blood

⁶⁰ Clifford E. Clark, *The American Family Home: 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 209.

⁶¹ See a discussion beginning on page 82 of Andrew Michael Shanken, *194X: Architecture, Planning, and Consumer Culture on the American Home Front* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) for a discussion of how interwar and wartime planners and designers deployed the American frontier myth to explain how new flexible interiors granted occupants independence and freedom to shape their identity. Architect Paul Nelson, for example, claimed that like the American frontier, the flexible interior of his Suspended House (1936-38) enabled inhabitants to rework it to meet their needs, desires, and self-image.

⁶² The desire for privacy was purportedly one of the reasons why postwar American relocated to the suburbs in such great numbers. Cornell housing scholar Glenn Beyer noted in 1955 that, "Undoubtedly the desire for privacy is one of the important factors behind the decentralization movement taking place in our cities today." Yet when they got their homes in the suburbs, many Americans still found solitude elusive. Picture windows often looked into other picture windows. Conversations, arguments, favorite music and television programs were, by spatial proximity, a dearth of partitions, and thin walls, now shared experiences. Beyer, "Home Selection and Home Management", 147.

took up the issues of domestic politics and friction at a time when family members were undergoing profound cultural redefinition. He argued that it was the understanding of the family as a site of group privacy and close contact that set the stage for conflict among its members. He saw the physical make up of the home as an integral factor shaping family relations. Blood wrote that, "If a man's home is his castle, it is also the place where his dungeons of despair are." With its concealment from the outside world, the home left its occupant-family open to each other's unconcealed emotions. According to Blood, "The very privacy which makes possible the most uninhibited embrace within the bedroom permits an equally uninhibited tongue lashing."⁶³

If, despite this privacy, the family was able to establish a degree of balance in the relationships between its members, such a balance was easily upset through the regular process of growth and change. According to Blood:

Every time a new child starts to crawl, to climb, to wander across the street, to go to school, to experience puberty, or to drive a car, the pattern of family living must be readjusted. The changing "developmental tasks" of growing individuals create corresponding "family developmental tasks." Even parents' needs change as, for example, when the mother loses her figure or the father fails to get the raise he expected. Since the American family specializes in personality development and personal need fulfillment, such individual changes tend to disrupt the family equilibrium.⁶⁴

⁶³ Robert O. Blood, "Resolving Family Conflicts," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 2 (1960): 209-219. A more recent sociological study concurs with Blood's characterization of the single-family home and the postwar pressures for family unity as a potentially harmful combination. According to the report's author the isolating nature of suburban life exacerbated such tensions. "By providing such optimal conditions for togetherness, these structural features of suburbia may actually be exacerbating the strain of trying to live up to an ideal that is essentially unobtainable." Laura T. Miller, "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," *Sociological Forum* 10, no. 3 (1995): 398-418.

⁶⁴ Blood, "Resolving Family Conflicts," 210. Clifford Clark saw this recognition of the family as a dynamic organism as an important development in postwar thinking about domesticity and individuality, present in magazine articles, advertisements, and sociology textbooks such as Clifford

Remodeling was one of the strategies Robert Blood saw families adopting to accommodate these life change. When evolving family dynamics caused a scarcity of physical resources conflict ensued. Blood argued that postwar prosperity has enabled Americans to deal with that scarcity and ameliorate its effects by modifying the home. Home improvement functioned as an “instrumental mechanism for resolving family conflicts.”⁶⁵

Experts and remodeling promoters often described the need to avoid friction and increase privacy from the parent's perspective. In previous eras, the house was an exclusively adult domain; adults decorated it, assigned functions and access to specific rooms, and dedicated little, if any, space to child play. The man of the middle and upper class house typically had his study or other masculine reserve for working, reading, and relaxing, where the female touch that permeated the rest of the home was excluded. Women's access to private space was less localized. While she was ostensibly in charge of the entire dwelling, spaces that she could call her own within it were scarce.⁶⁶

Postwar psychologists claimed such privacy was something every human

Kirkpatrick's 1955 book *The Family as Process and Institution*. Clark, *The American Family Home: 1800-1960*, 210.

⁶⁵ Blood, "Resolving Family Conflicts", 214. One of Blood's primary contentions in the essay is that families can avoid conflict (as they have in the past) by ensuring that they are structured as a solid patriarchy where one person (husband/father) has final say in important family decisions.

⁶⁶ It is important to distinguish the type of privacy called for in the postwar era from the type of privacy traditionally associated with domestic space. Historians have shown the myriad ways the home was culturally marked as a locus of involuntary female privacy, where women were isolated from the crass and immoral realm of public life. In contrast, the husband and father's study was a masculine refuge from public life and feminine domesticity. There, the man could indulge in emotional escape isolation at his leisure. The concept of spatial privacy that came to the fore in the twentieth century and reached new heights in the 1950s and 60s was more alike in motivation and function to the male study. It was of a selfish, individualized character, a voluntary separation that was empowering rather than oppressing.

required, like air and sunlight. Time alone helped the individual identify who they were and what was important to them. Private physical spaces facilitated entry into the private mental space that had long been considered a refuge for women in particular.⁶⁷ While it signaled retreat from the world and was often framed as a personal (albeit necessary) indulgence, postwar spatial privacy also was instrumental in that it was intended to refresh and prepare the person for a (re) engagement with the world outside, whether it was work at the office, the responsibilities of child rearing and home management, or the pressures of school or teen social life.

The expectation that parents were entitled a certain distance from their kids and the obligation that parents provide space for their children were common refrains in mass-circulation magazines, films, and television programs (Figure 1.5). The 1948 film *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, starring Cary Grant and Myrna Loy, illustrated the conditions that supposedly drove American families to seek privacy.⁶⁸ The movie's beginning is an indictment of urban life as noisy, crowded, and privacy-poor. These conditions are replicated within the urban apartment occupied by Jim Blandings, his wife, Muriel, their two children and maid. Despite Jim's successful career as an advertising copywriter, his daily life is almost intolerable inside the family's crowded dwelling. Depicted entirely from Jim's point-of-view, cramped quarters means spatial encroachment by his wife and daughters. From the sounding of

⁶⁷ Wendy Gan plots the twentieth century call for female spatial privacy as depicted in literature in: "Solitude and Community: Virginia Woolf, Spatial Privacy and A Room of One's Own", *Literature and History* 18 (2005): 68-80. According to Gan, new in the twentieth century was "the asking for physical space to accompany the inner space of refuge." Ibid. 68.

⁶⁸ H. C. Potter, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1948). The film was based on the 1956 book of the same title by Eric Hodgins, a former editor of *Fortune* magazine.

the morning alarm clock the film presents Jim's morning routine as a series of gendered and spatial humiliations: searching for his robe in a shared closet among frilly nightgowns, finding his wife's silk slips in his sock drawer (Figure 1.6). There is no respite down the hall, where daughters race ahead to occupy the single bathroom and chairs and radiators stand in the way of breakfast and the morning paper. Symbols of manhood—shaving, slippers, robe—are all present and usually subverted by the indignities of sharing space with women. In essence, the Blandings' existing home works to bind and constrict Jim's masculinity, tiny spaces are an affront to his manhood. As the film's title suggests, the ultimate solution to these challenges was for the Blandings to move out and build anew in the far suburbs.

The movie seems to present a counter-narrative to the remodeling rhetoric that is the subject of this study. Not only do the Blandings choose an entirely new home over remodeling, but Jim also views the latter as a conspiracy foisted on unsuspecting housewives by sexually dubious interior decorators. When Jim resolves he can't stand the apartment for another day, and Muriel resolves she can't stand Jim's complaining for another day, she proposes a remodeling in consultation with decorator Bunny Funkhauser.⁶⁹ The redesign would provide additional room and an updated appearance. Immediately Jim dismisses the whole idea, calling Funkhauser, "that young man in the open-toed sandals." To Blandings, such efforts were unmanly and their expense out of proportion to their rewards. Here, in a role encountered repeatedly in remodeling promotion, the husband is the fiscally responsible member of the pair,

⁶⁹ As with the Wood Conversion Company's Mr. Crumworthy (discussed below), Bunny Funkhauser's name is suggestive. Is the viewer to agree that his housing solutions will induce in the client a state of depression, a funk?

endowed with caution and frugality, who calls his wife "a defenseless woman without the slightest conception of the value of a dollar."⁷⁰ Though the eventual cost of his dream house is much higher and the process involves its own humiliations, it is only the act of constructing a new home from scratch that is deemed appropriate for the successful postwar family man in need of distance from that family.

The Wood Conversion Company, a Cloquet, Minnesota manufacturer of insulation and wood fiber wall and ceiling products, made two promotional films that utilized the narrative of growing families resolving spatial needs through remodeling. The first, *Make Room for Tomorrow* (1951), was intended to encourage carpenters to focus on the remodeling market (and use the company's product line when doing so).⁷¹ The second, *Happy House*, produced in 1954 and rereleased as part of the Operation Home Improvement initiative in 1956, was aimed directly at homeowners.⁷² *Make Room for Tomorrow* told the story of a family with teenagers and in-laws "confined in walls too small to contain their exuberant spirit." In the first scene, homeowner-father Mr. Crumworthy (surely worthy of more than the crummy situation in which he found himself) sits in a chair trying to read the evening paper as daughters, sons, and singing

⁷⁰ This gendered characterization dated back at least a century. Elisabeth Garrett discusses the husband as "family comptroller" with "veto power over any purchase deemed superfluous or extravagant" in: Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett, "'It Shall Be Procured Agreeable to Your Liking': Husband and Wife As Consumers," in *At Home: The American Family 1750-1870* (New York: Harry N. Abrams), 269.

⁷¹ Wood Conversion Company, *Make Room for Tomorrow* (Bruce Sifford Productions, 1951).

⁷² The films are retained by the Minnesota Historical Society in the Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31. The Wood Conversion Company distributed both movies to local building material suppliers and remodeling retailers along with a kit containing posters, radio spot announcements, publicity releases, invitations, and an in-store display. Following a promotional campaign aided by the kit's tie-in sales tools, dealers were to screen the film before PTA assemblies, school and church groups, and luncheon and service clubs in their community. According to a trade magazine advertisement the film was sure to hook consumers ("they see...they listen...then they buy") and profit dealers who were told to "get your share of today's huge remodeling market!" *Wood Conversion Company, American Lumberman* (April 4, 1954), 342.

mother-in-law swirl around him (Figure 1.7). He learns that his neighbor is finishing his attic and hires a carpenter to do the same. When the work is finished, children play upstairs and downstairs, their grandma sings in her own room, while in the tranquil living room Mr. Crumworthy reads his paper and Mrs. Crumworthy knits. Back at the lumberyard, the remodeling carpenter states proudly that his work benefited the entire family, each member of which "deserved their own privacy and opportunity to express themselves."⁷³

The newlyweds Anne and Bill, in *Happy House*, move into a bare, recently built home in the suburbs. Bill is concerned about the small size but, with Anne's encouragement, sees "wonderful possibilities" for growth. Anne's father, Joe (a builder or building product retailer who serves as the voice of wisdom and mouthpiece for Wood Conversion Company products), offers to send a truck over, presumably with building materials (Figure 1.8). Anne demurs noting that he had already provided the wedding and an antique cradle. Referring to the latter, he responded, "You just keep it filled." It was a blunt allusion to the new housewife's chief responsibility, procreation, as well as the man's obligation to keep the resulting family suitably and spaciously sheltered. This view is confirmed when Anne and Bill's first child comes along and Joe tells Bill, "with a family now, you're just going to have to have more room." He shares a Wood Conversion Company brochure depicting a children's attic bedroom and then the film continues to follow the growing family.⁷⁴ With the birth of each

⁷³ Wood Conversion Company, *Make Room for Tomorrow*.

⁷⁴ Photos of the circus-themed room were used widely in other Wood Conversion Company ads and promotional initiatives. The originals are in the Conwed Corporation archives at the Minnesota History Center. See further discussion below.

child (five by the end), the house is a little more decorated and filled in with furnishings. And with each new child, father-in-law Joe is there to pitch a new expansion project. After another daughter is born, Joe tells Bill "With a new baby in the house, naturally you'll want more room, so I brought over another one of these plans that the Nu-Wood people have for fixing up your porch out there."⁷⁵

Both Wood Conversion Company films incorporate rhetorical arguments common in postwar remodeling promotion. It was an obligation of American parents, the husband in particular, to provide space for his family. As that family expanded, more rooms were required. Children needed their own bedrooms and parents needed distance from children. Remodeling provided enough space to ensure familial tranquility and proper character formation. Working together to do-it-themselves was thrifty and furthered family cohesion. Expanding the existing home rather than moving to a new home cemented the family in a broader community. Improved house, with more space and more material possessions, stands as metaphor for an increasingly prosperous family and nation.

Bedrooms for Children and Teens

William Kessen argues that efforts to augment children's spatial provision within the home were based on "a salvationist view of the child" that social scientists espoused and postwar Americans embraced. According to Kessen, postwar child psychologists took "the Romantic notion of childish innocence and openness a long way toward the several forms of "If only we could make matters right with the child, the world would

⁷⁵ Wood Conversion Company, *Happy House* (John Sutherland Productions, 1953).

be a better place." The child became the carrier of political progressivism and the optimism of reformers. From agitation for child labor reform in the 1890s to Head Start [preschool programs], American children have been saviors of the nation."⁷⁶ By ensuring that kids had the professionally-recommended amount of personal space and that homes were conducive to community gathering, parents fulfilled an obligation to raise socially responsible offspring who would later contribute to the national weal.

Children, secure in their sense of self and aware of their own responsibilities, made communities strong, vibrant, and stable.⁷⁷ Efficient kitchens, low-maintenance exterior cladding, and up-to-date homes in general, were assumed to free up time otherwise spent on chores. Magazine articles, and social commentators often called for this free time to be devoted to community service, as town council members, youth group leaders, or on local beautification projects. Children with access to sufficient domestic space would not exert a negative force as town hooligans and mischief-makers. Home economists acknowledged the relationship between individual housing conditions and community viability. Said one writer in the *Journal of Home Economics*, "We are aware that lowered standards of conduct, juvenile delinquency, and crime can often be traced to crowded homes and unattractive living conditions. We believe the benefits of improved housing extend beyond the particular family to

⁷⁶ William Kessen, "The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions." *American Psychologist* 34, no. 10 (1979): 818.

⁷⁷ Community was a nebulous, if essential, concept of postwar American life. Its fragility was due to in part to the dislocation of the war years and the mobility and decentralization that followed. Young couples moved from the cities, breaking traditional connections with established ethnic neighborhoods. In the new suburbs everybody was a stranger to the other and community had to be knit from the beginning.

affect the welfare of the entire community."⁷⁸

Even the powerful cultural rhetoric of family togetherness could not buck the trend toward increasing privacy and attention to the needs of the individual. In the postwar era, experts argued for more clearly defined adult and child-assigned spaces after an interwar period in which "sexual freedom and lack of privacy were encouraged through a misapplication of psychoanalytical findings."⁷⁹ Authorities argued that privacy was essential to the child's proper mental and emotional development, a crucial component of toilet training, sexual education, and "other intimate matters."⁸⁰ Separate bedrooms and bathrooms reduced the likelihood of children seeing their parents' nude bodies. Child psychiatrists cautioned that such an experience would incite feelings of inadequacy, concern, fear or excitement in children, and that body education could be achieved more effectively and safely through discussion.⁸¹

More recently scholars have explored in depth the separation of child realms from adult realms, a practice that has come to be called, 'the islanding of children.'⁸² Beginning around the turn of the twentieth century adults constructed childhood as a rarified period of responsibility-free innocence, isolating children in distinct clothing,

⁷⁸ Gertrude Drinker. "Housing in Your Community." *Journal of Home Economics* 42, no. 5: 107.

⁷⁹ Edward Schiff, "Children Have a Right to Privacy," *The PTA Magazine* 56 (June 1962): 26.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 27. Schiff answers his question "Is the growing trend toward personal privacy and modesty a return to Victorian prudery?" with the response "Not at all. It is based on psychoanalysts' findings that nudity and open bedrooms and bathrooms are poor ways of satisfying children's natural sexual curiosity. Mere looking explains nothing. More likely to be disturbing than enlightening, it is no substitute for the education that comes through words—from frank answers to frank questions."

⁸² John Gillis examines these ideas in: "Epilogue: The Islanding of ChildreReshaping the Mythical Landscapes of Childhood," in *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children*, ed. Marta Gutman, Ning de Coninck-Smith and John R. Gillis (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008). For a review of childhood studies especially as they relate to material culture of play, see other essays in the collection.

summer camps, hospitals, and bedrooms.⁸³ Popular postwar magazines and manufacturer brochures embraced the practice, promoting idealized settings for child habitation—themed bedrooms, recreation rooms and all-purpose rooms with indestructible furniture. These spaces acknowledged the psychologists' assertion that kids needed "room for rumpus" and privacy to explore and consolidate their identity.

Implementation of such arrangements was largely dependent upon a family's available space and their socio-economic level.⁸⁴ When domestic space was at a premium, children continued to share bedrooms with multiple siblings, and in some cases, parents. Part of the conviction that children should have separate bedrooms stemmed from an abhorrence of overcrowding associated with urban slums inhabited by ethnic and racial minorities. In the postwar era, experts claimed kids required separation to assure they grew into well-balanced, emotionally and sexually sound adults with attributes expected of their gender.⁸⁵

A 1950 article entitled "Housing and the Family Life Cycle" noted specific requirements for a growing family, when children were at "habit-forming and

⁸³ In a related argument, anthropologist Edward T. Hall, claimed that the historical identification of childhood and distinctions within the nuclear family only came about with the "specialization of rooms according to function and the separation of rooms from each other." Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 104.

⁸⁴ Historian Peter Stearns dates to the turn of the twentieth century, the emergence of a cultural interest in separating children into bedrooms based on gender and age. He attributes the change to "the insistence on greater individuation and, probably, the growing concern about homosexuality. Peter Stearns, "Historical Perspectives on Twentieth-Century American Childhood," in *Beyond the Century of the Child: Cultural History and Developmental Psychology*, ed. Willem Koops and Michael Zuckerman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 103.

⁸⁵ An interwar article noted that public housing authorities frequently required tenants with children (as young as four years old) of different genders to rent apartments with additional rooms to ensure sleeping spaces would not be shared by siblings of the opposite sex. The policy that "children will have separate bedrooms from their parents, two to a room and the older ones of opposite sex in separate rooms," was said to be motivated by a desire "to insure health, privacy, and decency." Florence Dombey Shreve, "P.W.A. Housing Division Practices Home Economics," *Journal of Home Economics* 28, no. 6: 361-364.

experimental stages, physically, mentally, and socially." At a minimum, "a bedroom is needed for each two children of the same sex or each separate child of opposite sex" that was also near their own age.⁸⁶ As late as 1969, Dr. Joyce Brothers was advising that boy and girl siblings be given separate rooms by the time they reach age eight. She stated, "I know that's hard in these days of small homes and of apartment living, but if at all possible, it's worth making sacrifices for." Her reasoning was that, though young children may seem to be uninterested, "continued close association with a sibling of the other sex can make it hard to form heterosexual attachments later."⁸⁷

The Wood Conversion Company's promotional campaigns offer prime examples of how the spatial separation of children was to be achieved through home improvement. Between 1951 and 1958, the firm commissioned a series of attic conversions featuring their Nu-Wood pressed wood panels and tiles in actual homes in Levittown, Long Island and around the Minneapolis-St. Paul area (Figure 1.9). The company circulated "before," "in-progress," and "after" photos to local dealers and used them to illustrate numerous magazine articles and advertisements placed in *Better Homes and Gardens*, *American Home*, *Household*, *American Farming*, and other magazines. Through decoration, props, and posed models, rooms were assigned to children of specific ages and genders.

One of the most frequently circulated of the series depicted twin six-year-old boys playing in their circus-themed bedroom (the same one featured in the film *Happy House*). The design included striped patterns, valance-like wood trim along the

⁸⁶ Tessie Agan, "Housing and the Family Life Cycle," *Journal of Home Economics* 42, no. 5 (1950): 351-354.

⁸⁷ Joyce Brothers, "Parents and Privacy," *Good Housekeeping* 168 (February 1969): 50, 53, 55.

ceiling, a big-top ring inset in the linoleum floor, and beds enclosed in lion cage-like bars (Figure 1.10). It was a postwar interior Gesamtkunstwerk for children. Such decorative schemes clearly took to a new level the idea of the bedroom as refuge for the child, where their interests and imaginations could be fully realized. They can also be seen as the precursors to the type of themed children's bedrooms featured in more recent fantasy remodeling television programs such as *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*.⁸⁸

While the mass media promoted separate bedrooms for kids of all ages, a majority of attention was devoted to adolescents between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. In the 1950s and 60s, popular magazines, films and television programs presented the teenager as a distinct species.⁸⁹ The invention of the mid-century teenager was concomitant with the invention of the teenage consumer. In the late 1940s, retailers and advertisers began to earnestly appeal to teenagers who were able to make their own buying choices and to pay for their own purchases (or at least persuade their parents to do so). It was part of a culture wide process of market identification and segmentation, as producers and advertisers recognized the economic benefits of targeting and tailoring specific messages to specific audiences. Mass-market magazines such as *Calling All Girls* and *Seventeen* delivered young consumers to manufacturers and retailers while reinforcing the notion that they had distinct tastes

⁸⁸ The television series, which ran on the (U.S.) ABC television network between 2003 and 2012, featured a corporate-sponsored team of local builders led by host Ty Pennington transforming and upgrading a home owned by a family in need.

⁸⁹ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 8. The term, originally hyphenated, only came into common use in the 1940s.

in music, clothing, decor, and ways to spend free time.⁹⁰

According to contemporary press coverage, the appearance of postwar teens left parents confused and nervous. Who was this person, flopping on the couch, wearing strange clothes and listening to strange music? Such consternation tied into broader parental stress over their offspring that spanned the century, worries over the changing identity of youth and working mothers as well as a general acceleration of change in all areas of American culture from morality to technology.⁹¹ A variety of experts—child psychologists, sociologists, and educators—stepped in to stoke parental anxieties about raising teens, and to offer their own interpretations and solutions. Books appeared such as "How to Live With Your Teen-Ager." Articles asked, "Do you violate your teen-ager's privacy?"⁹² Developmental psychologists also helped parents avoid being a "holder-onto or a pryer-into."⁹³ Social scientists and home improvement salesmen told parents seek solutions to living with teenagers in the domestic built environment. Innumerable postwar articles advocated the creation of bedrooms and other spaces dedicated to teen use. Remodeling promoters encouraged parents to "graduate" teens up to a converted attic room that afforded space and the opportunity for personalization. Teen bedrooms became multifunctional spaces, accommodating sleeping, working, relaxing, and entertaining. They were to be places

⁹⁰ *Calling All Girls* was first published in 1941, *Seventeen* in 1944. Segmentation of the postwar mass-circulation magazine market and its focus on teens is covered in: Lizabeth Cohen. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. (New York: Knopf, 2003), 319-320.

⁹¹ See chapter one in Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

⁹² Dorothy W. Baruch, *How to Live With Your Teenager* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953). Helen Frank, "Do You Violate Your Teen-Ager's Privacy?" *Parents' Magazine & Better Homemaking* 35 (May 1960): 49, 140-142.

⁹³ Dorothy Baruch, "A Frank Talk with Parents of Teen-Agers," *Parents Magazine & Family Home Guide* 28 (October 1953): 108.

where gender-appropriate hobbies laid the foundations for future professions, and settings for serious studying and serious socializing.

The Wood Conversion Company's promotional photos show idealized examples of the multi-functional, individualized teen bedroom created from a once-empty attic. A "Girls Room" clearly designed for a teen featured striped bedding and matching curtain, a desk with typewriter, and toy stuffed dogs (Figure 1.11). Another photograph shows what was clearly the same attic room, reconfigured as a "Boys' Room." The designer had replaced the girl's striped fabrics with a more masculine plaid. Baseball objects (wire wall sculptures of batter and catcher, mitt and ball tossed on bed), assured there was no confusion over its occupant's gender. For the boy who preferred *Popular Science* to *Sports Illustrated*, an alternative "Boys' Room" featured a model kit on the desk, cars, helicopters, ships, on the ceiling and a bedside rack full of auto magazines (Figure 1.12). Typewriters and scale models signaled these were settings for work and the earnest identification and pursuit of individual interests. Other tableau the company commissioned suggested these rooms could also be used for relaxation and even entertaining. Several photos depict the room's female occupant and her friend getting ready for a dance. In another, the pair lounge on bed and floor, the record player on the rug and 45s scattered nearby (Figure 1.13).⁹⁴

Those bedrooms presented as sites for small-scale socializing were predominantly intended for families with teen girls. In profiles of the clients who had created these rooms, parents told of how they wanted spaces that combined privacy

⁹⁴ In a print advertisement promoting the use of pine in remodeling projects, the Western Pine Association called a similarly multi-functional space, "a combined study and platter paradise for the teen-agers. *Popular Mechanics* (November, 1951), 240.

and ease, a place for their daughters to negotiate the day-to-day personal politics of adolescence, or as one mother described it, a "proper atmosphere to exchange confidences with the bosom girl-friend of the moment."⁹⁵ In 1958 *American Home* magazine profiled a teenager named Barbara Jacobs and her parents' efforts to convert a basement into a bedroom that suited Barbara's lifestyle. Most prominent was the removal of two beds and their replacement with "sofa beds in tailored quilted covers plus a couple of additional comfortable chairs [which] add more seating space and convert the room to a sitting room-bedroom."⁹⁶ This remodeling process paralleled the guidance given to parents to remodel their own bedrooms into multifunctional spaces with easy chairs and coffee tables. Both offered privacy where the occupants could pursue their interests without being in visual or aural contact with others in the house.

The Inwardness and Outwardness of the Postwar Recreation Room

Adding a kid's bedroom in the attic or expanding the parents' quarters into a living room-bedroom enabled family members to temporarily forego togetherness, in settings conducive to tranquility and personal growth. But the rhetoric of duty-motivated

⁹⁵ The quote is from: Lonore Kent Kiefer, "Make Room for Your Teenagers," *American Magazine* 158 (1954): 28-31, 64-67.

⁹⁶ Barbara Lenox, "This Teenage Wouldn't Take It," *American Home* 60 (June 1958): 33. If teens found their parents unwilling to help create a personalized and private bedroom, the growing ranks of teen magazines told the kids to do the work themselves. The adolescent magazines like *Seventeen* and *Modern Teen* that came to prominence in the postwar era were eager to appeal to, and profit from, the teenager's concurrent emergence as a cultural force. These publications and their advertisers functioned to acculturate youngsters as consumers, to establish brand loyalty that would be sustained throughout their lives, and to have teens pass along taste preferences to their parents.⁹⁶ Teen consumption was often directed toward making distinctive, personalized spaces. Decoration and interior design, layouts and room functions needed to stay in step with one's age and status, as well as one's local and national peer group. Promoters worked to instill the idea that a bedroom must reflect its occupant's personality and tastes as understood at that particular moment and as confirmed by the mass media market. As will be discussed in chapter three of this dissertation, those selling kitchen remodeling projects to postwar homemakers pitched the same rhetoric.

remodeling extended to another type of home improvement that promised to reconcile the tension between competing desires for privacy and family interaction. The postwar recreation room, alternately called the playroom, game room, or simply rec room, could accommodate these functions and more. It was a setting where adults could gather for informal card games or the weighty work of civic and national improvement. More often, though, recreation rooms were a further concession of dwelling space to the priorities, lifestyles, and perceived needs of youth. They served as isolation chambers for noisy kids, where roughhousing and noisemaking was permitted (Figure 1.14). (*Parents* magazine called them, "Don't Say No Rooms."⁹⁷) They were rooms for teen entertainment, unhindered by the omnipresence of square parents.

Recreation rooms were part of a general reconfiguration of postwar home design, away from rigidly adult-centered rooms to more open, relaxed, child-focused spaces. *McCall's* house and home fashions editor, Mary Davis Gilles, argued in 1950 that a primary defining characteristic of the modern house was not a flat roof, glass window wall, or purity of massing, but its provision of space where kids could be kids. Gilles noted that in child-centric modern design, "furnishings are not so fragile. There is more consideration of play areas. There is adequate storage for play and game equipment within the living areas. Plot plans include play areas for children."⁹⁸

Parents who clung to formal interior layouts and fine furnishings were often

⁹⁷ Quoted in: Clark, *The American Family Home: 1800-1960*, 215. The term and concept are also discussed in: Daphne Spain, "From Parlor to Great Room," in *Gendered Space* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 128.

⁹⁸ Mary Davis Gillies, "What Is a Modern House?" *Journal of Home Economics* 42, no. 9 (1950): 714-715.

portrayed in consumer magazines as selfish and unwilling to sacrifice old ways for the betterment of their offspring. A mother in *Parents Magazine* noted that "a family living room filled with beautiful antiques and inherited treasures is not the ideal setting for the frolics of the teen-age crowd."⁹⁹ If homes didn't have spaces that resembled those recommended by Gillis, parents should provide them. A 1962 Georgia-Pacific brochure for their "Improve-A-Home Plan" instructed owners to "Create new children's space[s]...include provision for storage, provide privacy for growing personalities."¹⁰⁰

The postwar recreation room assumed a variety of forms. Most were in basements; some were in attics, but spare bedrooms, enclosed porches and patios, and spaces in or above garages also assumed the role (Figure 1.15). Manufacturers of acoustic tile and wood paneling presented their materials as ideal coverings for stud walls and raftered ceilings, easy to install by amateur and professional alike. Basement rec rooms commonly had vinyl flooring, vinyl-coated seats and couches, and plastic coated drapes and wallpapers reflecting concerns over durability and moisture and mildew-resistance. Promotions of these materials evince the adult tendency to see kids, and teens especially as another species, feral and requiring sequestration in settings of almost zoo-like indestructibility (Figure 1.16). Themed decorative arrangements were popular—western settings with knotty pine plank walls and wagon wheel chandeliers, English pubs, nautical motifs featuring bold stripes, lifebuoys on the walls, and deck chairs. One advertisement dazzled readers with options, "Just

⁹⁹ Ruth Webb Lee, "Make It Fun to Stay at Home," *Parents Magazine*, 19 (June 1944): 62.

¹⁰⁰ The eight-page brochure was included as an insert in the July 1962 issue of *Popular Science*.

think, your plain-looking basement made to resemble a Night Club of your own choice: Down to the Sea, On a Rustic Theme, Under the Big Top, Below the Border, etc."¹⁰¹ Bars and bar stools, hi-fis, televisions, organs or pianos, pool or ping-pong tables finished out the setting and confirmed that their use was not limited to youngsters alone.

Rec rooms traced their roots to the interwar "rumpus room" that offered families a comfortable setting for shared relaxation and entertainment within the home. Beginning in the 1940s, the recreation room took on a different function, a new identity that seemed at odds with its concomitant characterization as a locus of family togetherness. During the war, magazine articles encouraged homeowners to repurpose their 1920s and 30s rumpus rooms as spaces where teenagers could congregate and escape the strictures of life during wartime. The war—its blackouts, gas rationing, and general atmosphere of sober austerity and sacrifice—had taken away teens anticipated carefree years of driving and nighttime dances. Converted to an adolescent clubroom, such spaces would help mitigate these losses and provided a center where youthful needs were met. According to one author:

Boys and girls want to get together where there's not too much parental supervision. They love a place where they can develop their photographic negatives, where they are free to listen to the latest jive; where they can talk about LIFE. They want to relax and still be kids, or to take life hard and be grown-up. They want a chance to develop their minds, their bodies, and their emotions—a place all their own.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Homecrafts, *Popular Science* (March, 1953), 61.

¹⁰² Marcella Ryser and Elinor Scoville, "Donate Your Rumpus Room, Without Strings!" *American Home* 29 (March 1943): 30.

The recreation room really took off after the war ended.¹⁰³ While its explosive popularity can be primarily attributed to the cultural trends explored herein, there were also technical innovations that helped make basement spaces more habitable and inviting. Many dwellings shifted from coal to gas or electric furnaces after the war. New furnaces were not only smaller, they also banished from the basement coal bins, and trips to remove shovels full of ashes. More diminutive heating equipment could be more easily concealed, or even, as some manufacturers recommended, displayed prominently in the open. Remodeling promoters claimed that new products and technology could likewise address other problems common to basements. Damp walls could be sealed and concealed behind paneling. Cold cement floors could be painted or covered with rubber or asphalt tile (and by the early 1960s more frequently by wall to wall carpeting).

Cultural commentators of the 1950s, like those of the interwar years, saw recreation rooms augmenting and solidifying family closeness. A space where the family could play, relax, and be entertained together was a strong cementing agent strengthening the bonds between parent and child and among siblings. A professor of education at New York University declared in 1957 that:

Parents must do everything possible to make the family strong, healthy, and happy. And, in order to have cohesiveness, Mom, Pop and the kids must do things as a group. Only as the entire family learns to spend some of their leisure time with each other, and have fun doing it, can family strength be built.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Though its popularity (at least as a basement space) was always limited in areas where concrete slab foundations were prevalent such as in the south, west, and in modest suburban developments like Levittown.

¹⁰⁴ Charles A. Bucher, "Family Recreation, Foe of Juvenile Delinquency," *Recreation* 50 (1957): 46-48.

But psychologists and others also argued the importance of continuing to use the recreation room as was advocated during the war, as a space for adolescent seclusion away from the protective parental eye.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, social scientists, magazine editors, and eventually home improvement promoters, presented privacy as a crucial aid to the social and personal development of youngsters. Having a best friend over to listen to the latest songs, or entertaining a larger group with punch and dancing became elemental youth rituals during this period. According to a study of *Seventeen* magazine, "Every issue during the 1949-1950 period included multiple articles about hosting successful parties. Parties could be related to holidays or birthdays, but more often than not, *Seventeen* presented them as an opportunity to get 'the gang' together for some fun."¹⁰⁵ Parents approved because it kept their children nearby or within the protective realm of other trusted adults.

The absence of informal spaces within the home where kids could play without admonishment, where they would not have to worry about spills and could put their feet on the couch, could prompt bad behavior that culminated in kids seeking to escape the home at any opportunity. An *American Home* article titled, "Don't Decorate Your Kids Into Delinquency," claimed, "when a home offers...well planned facilities for play, there's not so great a chance that kids will roam afar to find fun."¹⁰⁶ Many parents were receptive to this rhetoric. One of their greatest fears during this period, and one of the most frequently discussed among cultural advisors, was that their

¹⁰⁵ Kelley Massoni, *Fashioning Teenagers: A Cultural History of Seventeen Magazine* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2010), 164.

¹⁰⁶ "Don't Decorate Your Kids Into Delinquency," 53.

children would succumb to delinquency or the predations of delinquents.

James Gilbert has described how concerns about delinquency reached a peak in the post-World War II era as popular culture homed in on teens, as traditional social networks were disrupted by postwar dislocation, and as an increase in social mobility swelled the middle class with those from lower strata.¹⁰⁷ In the past delinquency was conceived largely as an urban problem addressed by the creation of community and recreation centers, playgrounds, and other public facilities where youthful energies were channeled into productive, or at least harmless, activities, where adults could supervise and model proper behavior.

During the postwar era, parents and their advisors responded to the threat of delinquency by privatizing adolescent past times and incorporating them into the home. Spaces were created within the home where young people could hang out and socialize with a degree of adult control. The community pool hall, skating rink, and bowling alley, where such control was impossible and where the social mix could not be regulated, were all suspect. Social scientists and magazine writers encouraged parents to "Make it Fun to Stay at Home."¹⁰⁸ Joe and Mildred Morrison, who remodeled their basement into a recreation room for teenage daughter, Joanne, noted the dividends:

After a high-school dance, Joanne's crowd now likes to come to her house for a snack. Before the room was finished, they would go to a roadside restaurant in the area. On more than one occasion, the girls' frothy dance dresses drew unwelcome comment from rude contemporaries. In the privacy of the Morrison household, the girls feel more at ease. And their parents prefer to have them

¹⁰⁷ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.)

¹⁰⁸ Lee, "Make It Fun to Stay at Home", 19.

there.¹⁰⁹

Recommendations for recreation room designs often called for replicating the social spaces that parents wanted their teens to avoid: pool hall, tavern, community center. Ping-pong tables, hi-fis, and organs were important accouterments of domestic recreation rooms. But the essential piece of equipment intended to keep kids engaged and out of trouble, was a television. Like the rec room in which it was often located, the television was a tool for domesticating entertainment, for bringing the outside world into the house. Lynn Spigel has examined how TV, like new suburban developments, was a homogenizing tool that merged public and private spaces while excluding from representation issues of cultural difference. Spigel wrote that during the 1950s:

Numerous commentators extolled the virtues of television's antiseptic spaces, showing how the medium would allow people to travel from their homes while remaining untouched by the actual social contexts to which they imaginatively ventured. Television was particularly hailed for its ability to keep youngsters out of sinful public spaces, away from the countless contaminations of everyday life.¹¹⁰

While most often presented as a place of escape and insularity, the postwar recreation room was also deployed as a politicized and politicizing place, where young and old citizens could engage with issues of local and national significance. This apparent contradiction was manifest in the development of recreation rooms that

¹⁰⁹ Kiefer, "Make Room for Your Teenagers", 64.

¹¹⁰ Lynn Spigel, "The Suburban Home Companion: Television and the Neighborhood Ideal in Postwar America," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 189. The author continues, "Women's home magazines promoted and reinforced these attitudes by showing parents how television could limit and purify their children's experiences. *House Beautiful* told parents that if they built a TV fun room for their teenage daughters they would find 'peace of mind because teenagers are away from [the] house but still at home.'"

doubled as fallout shelters. As was mentioned earlier in the chapter, shelter construction advocates argued that these basement spaces could also be used as wine cellars, workshops, or play areas during times when the threat of attack was low.¹¹¹ One design offered a complete integration of shelter and recreation. First published in 1967, at the nadir of family shelter construction, the "Permanent Shelter, Plan D" featured brick or concrete block snack bar that that could be converted into a shelter on short notice by lowering on to the countertop a false ceiling suspended above onto the counter top (Figure 1.1). To complete the conversion process, owners were to stack bricks (stored nearby in the form of a bench) on top of the ceiling giving it added weight and thickness. The resulting shelter, only as high as the snack bar counter, would not have been comfortable for long.¹¹²

Recreation rooms also served as sites to host scout and civil defense meetings, inculcating in participants a sense of duty, while inoculating them against the allures of communism. The theme of the 1954 Wood Conversion Company film, *Happy House*, discussed above was that growing families needed to grow their homes. In the film's final act husband Bill says "no" to yet another remodeling project, this time to finish the basement as a rec room. His wife, Anne, responds, "Then we'll have to move, spend more money than we can afford, changing the kid's school, leaving all our friends, changing our church, and give up the house we've always known." Bill's unwillingness or inability to fulfill his obligations poses a threat that extends beyond

¹¹¹ Or when the strategic value of shelters and any hope of surviving nuclear attack faded due to the increased firepower of later generation ICBMs and their multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, as well as a growing understanding of the long-term effects of nuclear fallout.

¹¹² *Fallout Protection for Homes with Basements* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, Office of Civil Defense, May, 1967).

the physical confines of the home putting at risk the family's link with its wider community and its stabilizing, rooted connections.¹¹³

When Bill concedes and agrees to remodel the basement, these bonds between family and outside world are reasserted. The film's narrator, assuming the voice of the house, states "It wasn't long before the final transformation was complete and I could serve a vital new social function." The film cuts to a Cub Scout troop taking their oath in the basement rec room, reinterpreting the characterization of the room as a space of civic engagement and moral and patriotic indoctrination. It also reasserts a traditional role of the American mother; she was not just a parent to her own children but also "den mother" to the community and country beyond.

A maternal responsibility to nurture the nation, dated back to the early Republic. At the time, the metaphor of familial and marital affection used to explain the relationship of government to governed was sullied by male shortcomings, and the marriage metaphor replaced by one focusing on motherhood. Jan Lewis writes, "If women could not, as wives, effect miraculous transformations in the behavior of grown men, they would simply have to start the work of moral reform earlier, before vicious habits had become ingrained."¹¹⁴ Maternal tenderness became the primary tool to raise American boys of noble character and republican values. Percy Maxim Lee, president of the League of Women Voters, echoed these ideas in a speech at the 1952

¹¹³ This was not intended as a critique of the first postwar suburbanites who moved to new developments. The family that is the subject of *Happy House* were suburban homesteaders themselves but had lived there for more than a decade, cementing community and church ties in the meantime.

¹¹⁴ Jan Lewis, "Motherhood and the Construction of the Male Citizen in the United States, 1750-1850," in *Constructions of the Self*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 150.

American Home Economics Association annual meeting when she stated that the nation's greatest human resource was "woman-power, largely untapped for public service, uniquely qualified through family experience to make a significant contribution to the development of the whole society."¹¹⁵ Anne's remodeled basement in the film *Happy House* enables the maternal model of patriotic education to be realized. Instead of alienation and dislocation caused by moving, the parents' recognition of their duty enables a more connected present and a more secure future for their neighborhood and nation.

Conclusion

Central to the presentation of postwar home improvement as a duty and obligation was the elision of home and family. That parents should try to advance the intellectual, emotional, and social well being of their offspring was an obvious and unquestioned assumption dating to well before the postwar period. What was relatively new was the way parents were encouraged to actuate that advancement through home remodeling, to see the physical dwelling as instrumental in the shaping of their children. Conflating the nuclear family with the single-family house that sheltered them had enormous implications for how the house and changes to it were considered. Improvement of the former was contingent upon improvement of the latter. When the family encountered any difficulties, internal (tension among family members, acting out adolescents) or external (teenage toughs at the soda shop, the threat of nuclear annihilation), they were told to seek solutions in the creation of new spaces, and reconfiguration of existing

¹¹⁵ Lee, "The Family in Our Democratic Society", 501.

spaces within the home.

Improving the home was a way to improve the family, stronger families made communities stronger, better communities made the nation better. And in the postwar world, after Allied victories in Europe and Asia (victories at once moral, political, economic, and cultural), this desire to improve the United States could be extended to a desire to improve the world as a whole. In 1956, *Look* magazine asked its readers to "just look around and see how many Americans are holding more responsible jobs, going back to their churches and synagogues and attending summer art and music festivals. When these things are added to an already insatiable quest for new horizons, for new gadgets and improvements, and to the desire to leave the world a little better for the next generation, one can see why many people feel a great evolutionary change has occurred in our time."¹¹⁶ Drawing from deep cultural strains that valued 'boots strap' betterment and a faith in transformation, Americans had the resources and the will to extend the benefits of that "great evolutionary change" beyond their borders.¹¹⁷ This was an obligation and expectation, a burdensome reward similar to homeownership itself.

In the post-World War II era, many in the United States considered the American house and the American family in dire need of improvement. After decades of Depression and war, existing American dwellings were worn out and out of step

¹¹⁶ "Why We Buy What We Buy." *Look* (May 1956): 97.

¹¹⁷ The Marshall Plan, the United Nations, and innumerable other postwar initiatives can be seen, to some degree, as articulations of the American desire to improve and reshape the world in its image. See, for example: Brian Angus McKenzie, *Remaking France : Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005). Graham Greene's 1955 novel, *The Quiet American*, portrays this inclination to improve as destructively naive and arrogant. Graham Greene and Robert Stone, *The Quiet American* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

with contemporary needs. New suburban homes were aging rapidly, their diminutive size incapable of containing their growing inhabitants. At the same time, authorities thought that juvenile delinquency and sexual and parental permissiveness were chipping away at the American family unity and traditional values. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover used the unimproved house as a metaphor for a weakened American family and society. In a 1956 article in the *Rotarian*, he wrote:

The mortar of parental duty, family love, personal honor, and sound religious concepts, once impervious to attack, has been critically weakened. There now appears to be far too much sand in the mortar which joins the bricks in our homes. Wherever mortar is weak, cracks appear, the foundation crumbles, and piles of rubble start to grow. In like manner, homes disintegrate—and the victims in the rubble heap are the youngsters.¹¹⁸

Responsible, patriotic, civically inclined men and women did not abandon child victims to rubble heaps and disintegrated houses. They recognized their obligations, heeded the advice of psychologists, architects, and building material manufacturers, and embraced home improvement. Acknowledging that their families were dynamic organisms undergoing constant change, they accepted the obligation to constantly adapt their home environment to address new needs. Where J. Edgar Hoover used home neglect as a metaphor for societal decay, *McCall's* magazine executive editor Camille Davied optimistically embraced creative remodeling as a route to societal regeneration. "I've heard of atom bombs destroying homes—I don't think we'll ever hear of atom power creating one. It will always take people and love. Yes, I think the home is more important than the satellite . . . and as the quality of our American way of life is being re-evaluated around the globe, we too must re-evaluate it. We must be

¹¹⁸ J. Edgar Hoover, "Punish the Parent?" *The Rotarian* (October 1956): 24-26.

sure that it is good; that it is better than ever before."¹¹⁹ Up-to-date American homes were suitable representations of American beneficence, models that could lure those from around the world toward capitalism and away from communism. The material rewards for being middle-class citizens of the postwar United States—a detached home, chief among them—were tempered by responsibilities and duties. Above all, there was the duty to ensure that the people under their care were given every opportunity for advancement and betterment through the appropriate provision and adaptation of that detached home. This was an obligation that experts of all sorts and home improvement promoters never tired of repeating.

¹¹⁹ “Better Living Newsletter,” *Printer’s Ink*, October 25, 1957, 12.



Figure 1.1. Promoters claimed that when attack was not imminent, basement shelters could serve multiple functions, such as wine cellars or recreation rooms. In this August 3, 1964, image from the *Miami News*, Mrs. Stewart and her son, David, “relax in their multiple-use fallout shelter. The interior of the shelter mimics the comforts of home, with two beloved dogs, a TV, telephone and wall décor.”

Source: Charles Trainor photographer. *Miami News* Collection, HistoryMiami. 1989-011-3875. <http://historymiamiarchives.org/online-exhibits/cold-war/life.htm>. Accessed March 20, 2013.

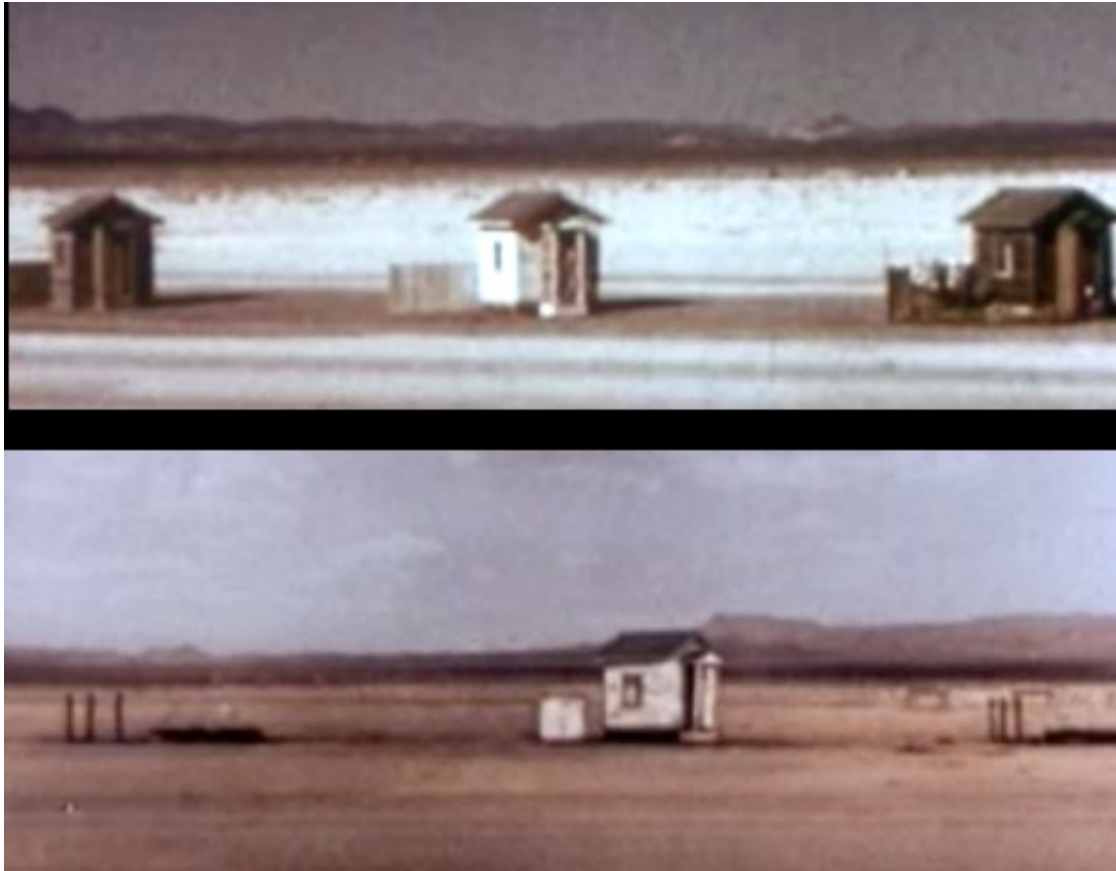


Figure 1.2. Before (top) and after (bottom) still images from the 1954 film, *The House in the Middle*, demonstrate how a well-maintained home (in the middle) was more resilient to a nuclear detonation and the ensuing firestorm than adjacent structures with deteriorated paint jobs and clapboard, and litter and clotheslines in the yard. Sponsored by the National Clean Up–Paint Up–Fix Up Bureau and the Federal Civil Defense Agency, such studies argued that regular Americans could contribute to a Cold War victory by improving their homes.

Source: National Clean Up–Paint Up–Fix Up Bureau, and Federal Civil Defense Administration. *The House in the Middle*. 1954.



Figure 1.3. Three still images from *The House in the Middle*, showing what tasks American citizens should undertake to make their homes and neighborhood more nuclear attack resistant. Clockwise from top right, gardening, painting house exterior, repairing deteriorated stairs.

Source: National Clean Up–Paint Up–Fix Up Bureau, and Federal Civil Defense Administration. *The House in the Middle*. 1954.



Figure 1.4. Depictions (top) of conditions that, in the event of nuclear attack would facilitate the rapid spread of fire. On the bottom is a test representation of such conditions, complete with crumpled newspapers in the yard, clothes on the line, and a poorly maintained, unimproved house.

Source: National Clean Up–Paint Up–Fix Up Bureau, and Federal Civil Defense Administration. *The House in the Middle*. 1954.



Figure 1.5. A *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Amos Sewell illustrated a scene that must have resonated with many postwar American parents. The father depicted would surely be receptive to a sales pitch for a second bathroom.

Source: Amos Sewell, "Brushing Their Teeth." *Saturday Evening Post*, January 29, 1955, cover.



Figure 1.6. Still images from the first scenes of *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse* showing the Jim Blandings's morning routine hindered by the size of his family and the size of his urban apartment. Clockwise from top right, Blandings searches his shared closet only to find his arm stuck in his wife's nightgown, children racing between the bathroom and bedroom almost spill his coffee, shaving is a dangerous proposition in a shared mirror, and occupants must twist and to accommodate each other in the small dining room.

Source: *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse*. Directed by H. C. Potter. RKO Radio Pictures, 1948.



Figure 1.7. Still image from the promotional film, *Make Room for Tomorrow*, sponsored by the Wood Conversion Company. The protagonist Mr. Crumworthy tries to read the paper surrounded by his active family in a too small house. Finishing the attic and basement (with Wood Conversion Company products) provides deserved space for each member to pursue their own interests.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. *Make Room for Tomorrow*. Bruce Sifford Productions, 1951. Image M-506, Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31



Figure 1.8. Still image from the promotional film, *Happy House*, sponsored by the Wood Conversion Company. Young husband and father, Bill (right), and his father-in-law, Joe, consider the remodeling of Bill's attic to accommodate his growing family.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. *Happy House*. John Sutherland Production, 1953. Image M-520, Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31.



Figure 1.9. The Massapusts of Minneapolis, Minnesota consult a drawing of their imminent attic remodeling project, a conversion of the space into a bedroom for their two boys.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. Image BNE-676, Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records.



Figure 1.10. Attic space converted to a boy's dream bedroom. Charles and David muddy the circus theme with a game of cowboys and indians.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31.



Figure 1.11. A 1958 promotional photo from the Wood Conversion Company of an attic space remodeled into a teenage girl's bedroom. Note the prominent use of wood fiber wall board and ceiling panels.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31.



Figure 1.12. Wood Conversion Company promotional photo of attic finished to serve as teenage boy's bedroom. It is likely the same space depicted in Figure 1.11, but redecorated with the gendered accessories of male adolescence.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31.



Figure 1.13. Another 1958 promotional image commissioned by the Wood Conversion Company showing an attic finished as a teenage girl's bedroom.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31.



GIVE THEM A RUGGED PLAYROOM!

Why shouldn't it be the basement? You can remodel it at very reasonable cost with our fine quality materials. Come in and let us help you select the right supplies for the job.

Do-It-Yourself
Headquarters

JOHN H. LONG
LUMBER • HARDWARE • PAINTS

Since 1688

Since
PHONE 2-7645
CLEONA

Always A Place To Park

Figure 1.14. Local remodelers encouraged parents to provide child-friendly interior spaces that could stand up to abuse.

Source: Advertisement. "Give Them a Rugged Playroom!" *Lebanon [Pa.] Daily News*, January 25, 1955, 14.



Figure 1.15. Not all recreation rooms were in the basement. This “Attic Music Room” remodeling project proposed by the Wood Conversion Company was stocked with a soda bar, piano, hi-fi, and television. In the various promotional photos of the design, seven well-dressed teenagers sing-along, dance, and watch television. To expand the design’s demographic appeal, the company also photographed the room with adults enjoying the space.

Source: Wood Conversion Company. Minnesota History Center. Conwed Corporation Records, Location 144.D.5.1B, Box 31.



Figure 1.16. A kid-friendly room developed by the Home Furnishings Department at *American Home* magazine in 1955. The objective was to design a room that was beautiful, affordable, and above all, durable. The room featured a vinyl floor, silicone-finished draperies, furniture covered in plastic fabrics, and wallpaper with a plastic coating. Represented are all the activities remodeling promoters and social scientists declared young needed space and privacy to pursue.

Source: "Don't Decorate Your Kids Into Delinquency." *American Home*, November 1955, 65.

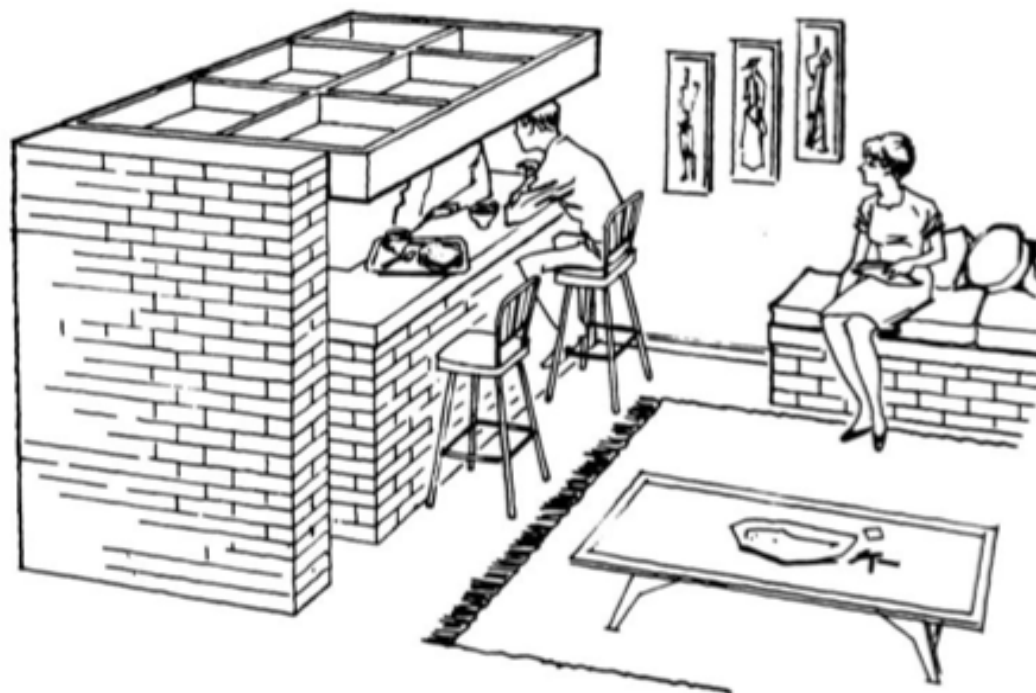


Figure 1.17. Permanent Shelter, Plan D, from the 1967 Office of Civil Defense booklet *Fallout Protection for Homes with Basements*. This recreation room snack bar constructed of brick or block could be quickly converted into a shelter by lowering the hinged ceiling and stacking bricks (from the adjacent bench) on top of the lowered ceiling.

Source: *Fallout Protection for Homes with Basements*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, Office of Civil Defense, May, 1967.

CHAPTER 2 SETTINGS FOR SELLING: REMODELING RETAIL CENTERS TO SELL HOME IMPROVEMENT

In September 2011, Robert Nibloc, President and Chief Executive Officer of the big box home retailer Lowe's announced his company's new branding initiative. "Never Stop Improving," was an exhortation to the chain's customers to embrace constant home renovation while reasserting the company's commitment to the consumer remodeling market. New online services, store modifications, and television commercials produced for the campaign argued that every life change and every new product or paint color that appeared on the market was cause for remaking one's home (Figure 2.1). But Nibloc's announcement also was directed internally. An accompanying press release stated, "Never Stop Improving is our promise to them [the customers] that we will constantly be innovating and improving at Lowe's so we can satisfy their ever changing needs."¹ In other words, it was imperative that the company constantly updates its stores and operations in order to meet the consumer's desire for constant updating their homes.

Tracing reciprocal consumer and retail remodeling back to the first decade of the post-World War II era demonstrates that Lowe's concept was not new. In fact, it was foundational to the building product industry's engagement with home improvement during this period. Hardware stores and lumberyards (from which the postwar home improvement center emerged) had well-known reputations as

¹ Lowe's Companies, Inc., "Lowe's Announces New Brand Positioning: Never Stop Improving." Press Release. (Mooresville, NC: Lowe's Companies, Inc., September 19, 2011).

masculine, exclusive spaces. They were patronized and occupied by tradesmen and those who knew their way around tools, materials, and construction sites. As women increased their authority over big-ticket purchases, as amateur homeowners of both genders increasingly took on home improvement work themselves, and as retail competition swelled, storeowners realized that past retail models no longer functioned. As with other areas of retail, building material dealers were looking for ways to accommodate changes in social, economic, and physical changes in American culture. The home improvement center, like the supermarket, department store, and discount store, was a retail realm where new forms of promotion, selling, and store design were tested and refined. Remodeling dealers (and eventually the manufacturers that supplied them) turned with growing solicitousness to unskilled customers and women for patronage and profits. The updating and reconfiguring of building material merchandising outlets, in turn, was a central tool in encouraging more consumers to undertake remodeling projects of their own. By refashioning the appearance, layout, and operation of the home improvement center, owners were hoping to establish a connection in the consumer's mind between the action of remodeling the store and of remodeling one's home.

Examining articles from 1945 to around 1960 in representative trade journals, newspaper advertisements, manufacturer archives, and oral interviews, reveals two common interrelated approaches that forward-thinking remodeling retailers adopted to attract new customers, women especially. First, dealers adopted modern merchandising and store design models. In many ways these were based on developments in both residential and commercial Modern architecture. An emphasis

on transparency and efficiency drawn above all, from supermarket design was meant to counter the dark and disheveled reputation of these stores. Second, remodeling retailers created within their store reassuring facsimiles of relaxed domesticity, deploying replica home environments to engender in their customers feelings of ease and comfort. These immersive, themed environments, again drawing on other retailing strains, encouraged casual browsing while providing physical models for remodeling consumption.

Introducing to their stores a calculated balance of modern efficiency and the symbolic comforts of home, retailers expanded their customer base, reduced consumer resistance, and modeled ideas of progress and innovation.² Whether fluorescent lit modern sales floor or homey model kitchen display, the efforts of what trade magazines called "progressive dealers" to make retail centers attractive and place consumers in the buying mood were undergirded by a focus on the shopper's senses. Stores were to be attractive, clean, open, and bright. Up-to-date showroom layouts enabled customers to *see* everything on offer; displays and demonstrations disarmingly showed how products worked and how they appeared installed. Prospects were able to touch the inventory, to pick it up without asking a clerk, to slide their hands across models and sample materials. Most importantly they were to *feel*

² The combination of these seemingly incompatible practices in a single store might initially suggest the trial-and-error attempts of a retail sector finding its identity, finding the identity of its consumer base, and refining practices for encouraging consumption. Yet modern architecture and modern interior design have often been married with domestic informality and more traditional notions of "homeyness," especially when presented for mass consumption. *Sunset* magazine, for example, specialized in "warming up," or domesticating, modernism and presenting it to a mass, middle-class audience. House designs by John Lautner and Albert Frey in Southern California and Bay Area Style designs in Northern California blended to creative effect modern aesthetic efficiency and rationality, with a relaxed, even playful, informality.

comfortable and confident in the store; haptic and visual appeals were to reassure the unsure, to convert browsers into buyers.

Retailers Turn to the Postwar Remodeling Market

That hardware stores and lumber dealers embraced residential remodeling through changes in their stores and operations was somewhat ironic. Both business types were typically among the oldest commercial establishments in their locales and both shared a reputation as tradition-bound and unchanging. One industry observer conceded in 1948 that lumberyards were commonly considered "backward and moss backed."³ With products in a seemingly random jumble and ceilings hung with watering cans, buckets, and lanterns, the turn-of-the-twentieth century hardware store was often characterized as a dark and cave-like space decipherable only to the owner, employees, and regular customers (Figure 2.2).⁴ At the same time, lumber operations usually consisted of sheds sheltering the timber and millwork inventory and a modest office where business was conducted with contractor and builder clients. In their layout, as well as the make up and habits of their sales staff and clientele, lumber and hardware outlets conveyed clear notions of class, gender, and building trade knowledge. The lumberyard and associated milling shop had always been a male-dominated, sawdust-filled, domain where workers unloaded and stacked material

³ "Retail Management," *American Lumberman* (September 11, 1948): 118.

⁴ Though it is on the outer edge of the period under study, a 1983 marketing survey of individually owned hardware stores typifies the traditional setting, describing one such retail establishment that still survived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was, "amazingly disorganized and crammed full from floor to ceiling. Across the store run wires from which hang small items on cards or hooks. The store is organized only in the broadest sense by category. One wall holds tools, but mixed in with the tools are furniture cups on cards, brushes and so on. Next to this are garden tools, behind which are butane torches." Ernest Dichter, "Tools for Independence: Why People Buy Hardware and Garden Supplies," Unpublished Article Manuscript. (June, 1983), 8.

amidst heavy machinery and sawdust. Author Margaret Mitchell confirmed the masculine character of these settings by having the heroine of her 1936 book *Gone With the Wind*, open and run a lumber business after the Civil War. The lumber yard and saw mill mark Scarlett O'Hara's dramatic break from her genteil antebellum past, and her assumption of an aggressive, survivalist instinct that paralleled that of the rebuilding Atlanta.⁵ Dark and smelling of turpentine, wood dust, and cigar smoke, hardware stores were the proverbial cracker-barrel establishment. They were populated by "stove-side sitters," local loafers described by one historian as "capped and bearded democrats who found in the store the American equivalent of the English pub as a center for congenial comradeship."⁶ They were indisputably male settings, where women (or men anxious about their masculine credentials) hesitated to enter (Figure 2.3).

Richard Harris has argued that the emergence of the modern home improvement store can be traced to the first three decades of the twentieth century.⁷ During this period the growing market for precut house kits that Sears, Montgomery Ward, Aladdin and other manufacturers advertised and sold directly to consumers threatened lumber dealers. Seeing their share of new construction sales threatened by complete home packages, building material supply firms fought back by adapting new retailing and marketing models that focused on the consumer. They cleaned up their

⁵ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Scribner, 2007). Scarlett's purchase of the sawmill and lumber business is discussed in: Ann E. Egenriether, "Scarlett O'Hara: A Paradox in Patalettes," in *Heroines of Popular Culture*, ed. Pat Browne (Bowling Green, KY: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

⁶ Gerald Carson, "Cracker Barrel Days in Old Illinois Stores," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 47, no. 1 (April 1954): 13.

⁷ Richard Harris, "The Birth of the North American Home Improvement Store, 1905-1929," *Enterprise and Society* 10, no. 4 (2009): 687-728.

stores, established showrooms, expanded their product lines, and started mass advertising.

Yet judging by the frequency of stories in the industry trade press, most lumber and hardware stores had yet to embrace the new consumer-focused style of operation by the beginning of the post-World War II era. Journals from the period were replete with articles admonishing building material suppliers and contractors for not focusing on homeowner consumers. There are several reasons why beginning in 1946, progressive lumberyard and hardware store owners finally directed their firms' attention to the retail customer in greater numbers. There was a tightening of the new construction market and a need to protect against such dips, a continued move in retailing toward more diverse product lines, and crucially, a recognition of the economic potential of the remodeling market.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, building industry leaders warned of an ongoing shift in the business environment. It was a change from a wartime seller's market to a postwar buyer's market, in which wartime shortages would be eradicated and consumers demanded greater choice and were more selective in where and what they bought. Experts called on contractors and retailers to offer better service, a larger variety of products, and to expand beyond their traditional customer base.⁸ A narrow focus on a single product line or service or clientele was no longer considered a financially viable business model. Lumber and hardware store operators, and

⁸ See, for example: Lloyd J. Weir, "Merchandising and Selling in a Buyers Market," *American Lumberman* (March 27, 1948): 39, 47., "The Dealer of Tomorrow," *American Lumberman* (September 11, 1948): 256-264., and "How a Salesman Is Made!" *Domestic Engineering* (April 1952): 107-111. The shift from a seller's market to a buyer's market was delayed, especially in the construction industry, by the Korean War (1950-1953).

contractors needed to seek out new markets to ensure their survival in good economic times and bad. Home improvement, a virtually unlimited market, where existing demand could always be stimulated further and new demand created, was a logical area in which to expand.

Owners of older and recently constructed homes were remodeling customers. As the families of new homeowners grew and required more space, attics were finished and additions put on.⁹ Owners of older houses added bathrooms, finished basements, and updated with the latest finishes and features found in the recently constructed suburbs. Homeowners of all sorts increasingly bought into the idea that their house should be customized and regularly remodeled to reflect their occupants' ever-evolving lifestyles and personalities.

Building material retailers and contractors considered the home improvement market resilient to economic downturns. This was especially the case as the "do-it-yourself" trend gained momentum in the 1950s. When the economy sagged, more customers fixed and upgraded what they had rather than buy new, often investing their own labor or "sweat equity." When the economy and new construction was booming, a shortage of skilled tradesmen compelled homeowners to do themselves the work they wanted done.¹⁰ And whether amateurs, professionals, or some combination of the

⁹ Barbara Kelly has explored the trend of new suburban homeowners remodeling new suburban homes, using Levittown, New York, as a case study. Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (New York: State University of New York, 1993).

¹⁰ In the 1970s, as the DIY market continued to expand, *Chain Store Age Executive* explained that, "The strength of the DIY market is such that it booms when the economy does and, although not recession-proof, hurts less when the economy goes sour. When housing starts are up, home centers with contractor business boost that side of their sales. But with professionals tied up on new houses, homeowners are forced to make their own repairs, so consumer sales don't dip very far down. When times are bad, economically, home repairs often become a necessity for owners looking to protect their

two completed such projects, they all required new materials and fixtures. Remodeling work filled lulls in what contractors or retailers saw as their primary business activity. A manager at the Los Angeles mechanical contractor Lohman Brothers was asked why the firm started selling bath and kitchen remodeling packages. He replied, "We have found that our packaged bathroom and kitchen department provides an excellent means of keeping more men busy more of the time—in other words, it levels out the peaks and valleys in our overall operation. If the occasion demands, it can even carry the overhead for the entire business."¹¹

The various trades and retail types saw remodeling work as an extension of their existing operation and promoted themselves as being the most logical group to address this market.¹² Contractors had trusted access to the home interior; dealers had retail space and connections to wholesalers and manufacturers. Trade publications, as well as representative trade organizations and building material product manufacturers pushed for more engagement with homeowners interested in improvement, produced consumer surveys and profiled successful case study remodeling business practices. Manufacturers and wholesalers offered dealers training courses, display aids, and marketing guides that helped frame how their products were pitched to consumers.

Expansion into the home improvement market was an example of the

investment." "The Boom in Home Centers," *Chain Store Age Executive With Shopping Center Age* 54, no. 4 (April 1978): 27-28.

¹¹ "Mr. Big Goes in for Merchandising!" *Domestic Engineering* (May 1952): 92.

¹² For example, the trade magazine for plumbing and heating contractors argued, "Possessing unique advantages enjoyed by no other type of retailer, the domestic engineering dealer is in the best position of any merchandiser to successfully and consistently sell the \$3,000 complete kitchen package." "How to Sell the \$3,000 Package," *Domestic Engineering* (March 1952): 113.

diversification that retailers across the economy undertook in earnest after World War II. In fact, from the early twentieth century lumber dealers had expanded their inventory, adding lime and plaster, roofing, wallboards, tile, and insulation to their existing lines of lumber, window sash, doors, and moldings.¹³ Always known for the variety of products on offer, hardware stores continued to broaden their stock in the first half of the twentieth century to include housewares, sporting goods, appliances and remodeling materials. According to Regina Lee Blaszczyk, 1920s and 30s storeowners, facing competition from chain stores and mail-order firms "reenvisioned their shops as miniature department stores, as vendors of electrical, automotive, and household goods, from forks to furniture."¹⁴

In the postwar era, dispersed, car-oriented suburban development had American consumers looking for one-stop shopping opportunities. Stores and shopping centers that offered a range of products and services became preferred destinations. Supermarkets carried a greater range of "non-food" items. Drug stores began to carry tools and paint while hardware stores started selling greeting cards, toilets, and wall tile (Figure 2.4).¹⁵ Industry leaders pushed lumberyard and hardware store owners to see themselves not just as wood or hardware dealers but as "merchants of building products," each operating a "department store" of building materials,

¹³ "The Retail Dealer [history of Lumber Yards]," *American Lumberman* (September 11, 1948): 89.

¹⁴ Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation From Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 222. Note that Richard Harris also cites this discussion in his 2009 paper.

¹⁵ That lumber and hardware retailers were conservative and resistant to change is at least partially confirmed by the fact that many of the changes that industry organizations and publications were arguing for in the 1950s and 60s were the same ones promoted in the 1920s. See, for example: "The Dealer of Tomorrow." *American Lumberman* (September 11, 1948): 256-264.

equipment, and housing services.¹⁶ The addition of remodeling products and services was a typical component of this evolution. Plumbing and heating contractors who moved into retailing and started selling dishwashers, garbage disposers, and electric skillets found that such appliances could add up to a quarter of their total sales. A broader inventory of small products lured customers and also enabled dealers to "sell up" to larger, big-ticket projects such as a remodeled kitchen or bath.

The number of new products that entered the market and new cultural trends beyond do-it-yourself pressured retailers to continually expand. After the war, manufacturers re- tooled and redirected their production to the consumer and remodeling market, developing new materials and products or new uses for existing products. Steel companies established subsidiaries that made kitchen cabinets. Aluminum manufacturers introduced and aggressively marketed windows, metal siding, awnings, carports, and do-it-yourself material display racks (ambitiously referred to as an "aluminum supermarket for the craftsman").¹⁷ The move toward outdoor recreation and the rise of the yard as a central expressive feature of the home, for example, required that competitive retailers add lawn and garden departments. By

¹⁶ "Final Results—Survey of Dealer Selling Practices," *American Lumberman* (June 18, 1949): 41.

¹⁷ These moves were part of a larger national trend of building material manufacturers expanding and diversifying beyond their core product line. Building product firms were motivated to expand and diversify in part by the growing competition in the field. Postwar roofing and plumbing supply areas was especially cutthroat. Asphalt roofing manufacturer Flintkote expanded through acquiring other companies until they supplied materials used throughout the house, "from playroom to pool." "Building Materials: Completely Remodeled," *Forbes* (November 15, 1958): 54. The quote is revealing of the growing importance of leisure and informal lifestyle consumption to the building products industry. Plumbing fixture companies such as Crane and American-Standard were eager to identify other markets, within the building industry and beyond. (Crane expanded into defense and aerospace.) For a detailed discussion of the plumbing supply market and the difficulties of firms like Crane and American-Standard, see: "Setting the House in Order," *Forbes* 83 (January 1, 1959): 93-4. Reference to the aluminum DIY racks is in: E. A. Farrell, "Aluminum Supermarket for Home Craftsmen," *Modern Metals* (November 1957): 42, 44, 46.

the early 1960s, more lumber dealers were carrying gypsum board, roofing and insulation than were carrying millwork, sash, doors, and flooring. Also by the early 1960s, almost 90 percent of lumber retailers were selling paints, hardware, and tools, and over 20 percent were selling kitchen cabinets.¹⁸

A 1945 *Saturday Evening Post* article stated that wartime shortages and the resulting seller's market provided hardware retailers and others with "a wonderful alibi for mismanagement and meanness, they have made a field day for smart alecks, and having control of short items has encouraged many a clerk to become as moody and unapproachable as Garbo." The author argued that customers were "rated less important than freight elevator operators and janitors; churlish employees made them "feel like a dope and a rube" and the owner treated the customer "as if he were a mentally underprivileged beggar."¹⁹ Trade magazines argued that such haughty attitudes had to go, that in the postwar era, the customer was king. *The American Lumberman* reminded recalcitrant dealers that in the postwar era, "The consumer is literally the boss of all industry and all factors of industry. He keeps factory wheels turning, the delivery trucks of distributors moving, and the tools of building tradesmen working."²⁰ Along with expanding their stores to include new home improvement lines, dealers worked to broaden their appeal among a new coterie of shoppers most likely to purchase remodeling materials and services.

The two primary (and in many cases, overlapping) groups of customers that

¹⁸ Clark Row, "Changing Role of Retail Dealers in Lumber Marketing," U.S. Forest Service Research Paper SO-7, (New Orleans: Southern Forest Experiment Station, Forest Service, USDA, 1964), 9.

¹⁹ Robert M. Yoder, "I Just Want to Be a Customer," *Saturday Evening Post* (1945): 11.

²⁰ "The Dealer of Tomorrow," 256.

home improvement retailers hoped to attract and convince to remodel were amateur do-it-yourselfers and women. Building material manufacturers encouraged do-it-yourselfers with new products that reduced process and handling time to a minimum, shelter magazines made every project from stopping a leak to building an addition seem easy, and the broader culture promoted DIY as a distinctly American blend of bootstrap individualism and modern consumption.²¹ Retail initiatives directed at do-it-yourselfers were intended to instill confidence in their ability to do the work and to shield them as much as possible from exclusive trade knowledge. One retailer found that do-it-yourselfers appreciated his clearance department with remaindered wood pieces that didn't need cutting. "They can look around and find just the right size and priced piece of lumber they need for their projects without getting tangled up in lumber yard jargon about board feet and types of wood."²² Store features such as the grouping of related materials and tools in departments, and free workshops and demonstrations took the mystery and apprehension out of both remodeling shopping and remodeling projects. Displays were not only attractive but also explanatory.²³

Progressive dealers took care to ensure that male do-it-yourself amateurs were

²¹ It is impossible to generalize about the DIY customer—men and women, owners of older and brand new homes. Many had building skills acquired as children of working-class families, from handy parents, or during their wartime military and industrial service. Bomber production line riveters confidently picked up hand drills and electric saws in the postwar era. Other DIY-ers were complete novices with no manual experience. The importance that building material and retail trade organizations ascribed to the DIY trend is indicated by the fact that the National Retail Hardware Association changed the name of its journal from *Hardware Retailer* to *Do It Yourself Retailing*. Bob Vereen, *Surviving . . . In Spite of Everything: A Postwar History of the Hardware Industry* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2010), 94.

²² "Do-It-Yourself Super Marketing," *Hardware Age* (January 20, 1955): 113.

²³ Carolyn Goldstein noted, "Eager to please and rise to familial expectations, many men welcomed do-it-yourself products that placed ambitious home-improvement goals within their grasp. More than ever before, amateur handymen relied on tips from neighbors, hardware-store salesmen, and especially instruction manuals and how-to magazines." Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in 20th Century America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 77.

not made to feel insecure about their lack of expertise. Consumer psychologist Ernest Dichter told a 1954 gathering of Illinois lumber dealers:

One of the major reasons preventing the average individual from really following through on his urge to do the things himself, that prevents the lumber dealer from capitalizing fully on this new trend, is the fear of the individual, that he will be forced to admit failure. It is the job for the lumber dealer, as architectural and structural advisor which we have just described to tell the amateur builder that he will not be embarrassed, that no matter what happens the lumber dealer will help him out in the end.²⁴

Training salesmen to put non-professional male customers at ease and allowing them to educate themselves about products and processes without the mediation of sales staff was one of the objectives of consumer-oriented remodeling retailing. Still, as late as 1958, a humorous piece in the *Saturday Evening Post* suggested that not all hardware industry owners fully grasped the deleterious nature of male consumer insecurity. It described an exchange between a "gentleman" customer and a clerk who states, "Hold it. friend. You're about to ask about the pluke. O.K., look. Your obolator rotostats your rejestor cones, right? So your block can't foul your grammets, right? And your drivepin caraflaws your hex nut, right? O.K."²⁵ Self-service tactile displays and models, along with product packaging were essential ways of limiting the builder jargon and expertise to which amateur remodelers were subjected.

While remodeling retailers were increasingly sensitive to masculine concerns, they were primarily interested in the most prominent of the new customers, the postwar woman (Figure 2.5). One study of the evolving retail market observed that,

²⁴ Ernest Dichter, "Do-it-Yourself and You," Presentation Manuscript. February 10, 1954.

²⁵ Peg Bracken, "The Gentleman Tackles the Hardware Store," *Saturday Evening Post* (July 13, 1957): 38.

"women control the purse strings of America. Statistics show that 70 percent of private wealth is feminine controlled. Think of that in the light of consumer purchasing power. Think of your store, showroom or office in terms of pleasing women customers."²⁶ *The American Lumberman* observed that, "Mrs. Homemaker says the word that determines the purchase of practically every accessory and fixture in the home."²⁷ Other sources, however, suggest that despite the growing importance of women consumers, lumber and hardware retailers had continuing difficulties speaking their language. A poem by Alice Boyd Stockdale published in the *Saturday Evening Post* versified the potential for miscommunication between store clerk and female customer when the latter searched for a product she couldn't name. The poem continues: "Good-naturedly the salesman, Joins in the mental scrimmage, While I use words and pantomime, To crystallize the image, Till he's perplexed, and I am vexed, To see that it is very, Clear the stupid fellow lacks, Hardware vocabulary."²⁸

Retailers determined to attract Mrs. Homemaker developed new sales approaches, layout ideas, and sales staff and events that they thought would resonate with women and avoid exchanges like Stockdale described.²⁹ Many turned to women

²⁶ Again, while prewar trade magazines encouraged their retailing readers to focus on the female shopper such efforts received renewed and urgent attention after World War II. Weir, "Merchandising and Selling in a Buyers Market," 39.

²⁷ "Selling Home Decorating," *American Lumberman* (September 9, 1950): 120.

²⁸ Alice Boyd Stockdale, "In A Hardware Store," *Saturday Evening Post* (May 7, 1960): 103.

²⁹ It is uncertain that such hemming and hawing over the needs and desires of the female shopper was entirely necessary. Women were coming around to these stores even before the stores were coming around to women. One 1964 study concluded that 49% of hardware store purchases were by women. Over time, the central issue may not have been how to attract women to the store but how to get them to commit to a purchase once they got there. Such efforts were wrapped up in the dealers own insecurity about how to appeal to an unknown customer, overwhelmingly depicted in the trade magazines as one increasingly assertive in her shopping practices, yet at the same time mercurial, whimsical and indecisive. Emily M. Mauger, *Modern Display Techniques* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1964), 65.

themselves to provide entree to this new market. Stores hired female decorators or design specialists to help customers choose finishes and the optional elements that made up remodeling packages.³⁰ For example, those customers seeking assistance at Success Plumbing Company in Racine, Wisconsin, met with the wife of the company owner, who was able to “finish off” the remodeled kitchen, guiding selection of floor coverings and other decoration.³¹ Women also helped design and decorate model kitchens established in new home centers.³²

Where Ernest Dichter defined the postwar lumber and hardware store as a place of male ambivalence and potential emasculation, by the 1980s he argued that women considered them empowering spaces where ideals of home improvement could be enacted. "Women see in the hardware store an extension of their home, their pantry, their kitchen. They discover all manner of new household tools and products. They find ways of modernizing and redecorating their home and grounds, as well as way of keeping them in repair."³³ In the psychologist's estimation, women viewed hardware and similar retail stores as places where domesticity and consumption were entwined.

Remodeling retailers soon recognized that female and male customers who

³⁰ Female sales staff was exceptionally rare, in part, it was argued, because of shortage of labor. Female ownership or direct management of the whole store was even more rare, with owner/managers such as Ilsa Herring of the Herring-Price dealer in Laredo, Texas an exception. "Kitchen Sales Are Profit Sales: Dealers Promote Kitchen Sales From Coast to Coast," *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): 62.

³¹ Though the wife's marginal status (at least in the eyes of the article's author) is confirmed by the fact that her first name is not mentioned in the article. She is called only Mrs. Sanderhoff. "How 79 Contractors Are Handling Kitchen Jobs," *Domestic Engineering* (October 1954): 146.

³² For example the wife of a kitchen planner at the Gloucester Building Center painted garden views visible through the mock windows of the showroom model kitchens. "587 Kitchens Ain't Hay," *American Lumberman* (June 4, 1949): 62.

³³ Ernest Dichter, "Hardware Study" Unpublished manuscript. (June 6, 1983), 1.

were planning to do at least some of the remodeling work themselves needed more than just a convenient store layout and organization to ease their way into DIY. Traditionally hardware and lumber dealers typically sold products in bulk and with little or no consideration for display or packaging. While suitable for sale to those in the industry, such arrangements no longer worked in the new retail environment. In the 1950s store operators looked with growing frustration upon manufacturers that they felt were not keeping up with their needs during the shift toward amateur consumers and self-service operations. According to a 1958 survey "the dealer wants a package that will display its contents and help him sell them to customers. He sees the container as a possible showcase for the product."³⁴ To help sell, packaging was called on to explain the contents' attributes and increasingly to assure the non-professional that they could utilize the product in their do-it-yourself projects. The retailers surveyed considered products in the paint department to be the best packaged in their stores. This is to be expected, as painting and other interior projects were firmly ensconced as an amateur realm. While toolmakers were also targeting amateurs as consumers of their drills, saws, and other tools, retailers considered these items to be among the worst packaged.³⁵ According to its Packaging Coordinator, by 1958 the company "had ceased to think of packaging solely from a cost-reduction and standardiza-tion basis. Merchandising efficiency is now the No.1 goal. The prime consideration now is not how cheaply the package can be produced, but how it will do

³⁴ "Hardware Packaging Research Reveals Retail Trouble Spots," *Hardware Retailer* (November 1958): 119.

³⁵ William Lasansky provided insights into the twentieth-century development of consumer hardware in an interview recorded on December 19, 2012.

in the marketplace."³⁶

So all these changes worked together to reshape the building product store into what would become recognizable as a remodeling or home improvement store. Retailers appealed to new categories of consumers by embracing new forms of packaging, new store designs, and new sales pitches. They established the connection between the remodeling retail store and the home (the former being an extension of the latter) in the early postwar war period. They adapted and blended modern and traditional design forms, the former's novelty and focus on order, the latter's familiarity and comfort. It was the same approach that popular home magazine editors acknowledged was favored by the majority of their postwar readers. Consumer surveys and questionnaires revealed that consumers wanted the modern feel, but not necessarily the modern look. The result was what *Architectural Forum* called a "modified modernism" that emphasized spatial flexibility and convenience over a rigidly adhered to modern aesthetic.³⁷ Working in this fashion, remodeling retailers improved and reconfigured their outlets, combining homey domesticity and modern efficiency, establishing a model of improvement that they hoped new shoppers would embrace.

Modern Retailing

³⁶ W. H. Drews, "Packaging Needs of Consumer Vs. Industrial in Hardware Markets," *Modern Packaging* 32 (November 1958): 141.

³⁷ David Smiley, "Making the Modified Modern," *Perspecta* 32: Resurfacing Modernism (2001): 42. For example, Smiley notes "*House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon made it clear her readers wanted 'the function of modern architecture, without the look.' She reported that her readers wanted an abundance of large windows but they wanted them with traditional detailing, not 'whole hog modern.'"

All remodeled remodeling centers to some extent embraced a Modernist retailing model marked by efficiency, clarity, and control (Figure 2.6). A new cadre of professional "retail planners" and "layout engineers" helped shape the modern store, promising merchants their psychologically and scientifically-informed insights would increase sales. Magazines and manufacturers likewise touted the importance of moving change-averse hardware and lumber retailers to a more modern presentation and operation.

The reconfiguration of the hardware and lumber retailer into remodeling center drew inspiration in part from changes that the contemporary home was undergoing at the same time, especially the widespread adoption of open interior plans. New and remodeled homes increasingly saw the removal of ground floor partitions and a more casual, free flow between once highly differentiated spaces. Kitchens and living areas blurred together. Designers introduced greater transparency both within the house (through these open plans) and between the house and its surroundings through the use of picture windows, window walls, and sliding glass doors.

Remodeling dealers also found inspiration in other retail sectors, most notably supermarket design and food marketing. The supermarket was a quintessentially American retail setting. It was invented in the U.S. and represented contemporary attitudes toward scale, speed, convenience, and efficiency. A product of the Great Depression and its price conscious shopper, their fluorescent-lit rows of readily available packaged foods came to symbolize a postwar culture of consumer choice and

national abundance.³⁸ By one count, there were between 20,000 and 25,000 supermarkets in the US at the end of 1955. The *Harvard Business Review* noted in 1957 that "supermarkets are the pivot on which modern food marketing turns—and the food industry is the largest segment of the American economy."³⁹ Innovations in food marketing and supermarket environments rippled profoundly through other industries especially nascent retail settings such as discount stores and remodeling centers.

Modern retail settings had philosophical roots and physical parallels with modernist architectural and interior design ideas. The supermarket was idealized as a democratized, class-less space, where consumers of all economic levels and backgrounds could feel equally comfortable and at home, where the mix of prices and products spoke of inclusion and universality over exclusivity. This was in keeping with the ostensible social egalitarianism of modern architecture. Modern supermarket and remodeling center design drew much of their formal influence from modernist architecture. They exhibited a geometric purity, used industrial materials, and modular construction techniques and were designed for easy construction and alteration (Figure 2.7). With its glass exterior and open floor plate intended for quick reorganization, Mies van der Rohe's 1956 Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology would have made an ideal envelope for a postwar supermarket or remodeling center.

Modernism in design and modernism in store construction, arrangement, and

³⁸ For an interwar history of the supermarket and its influence, see: M. M. Zimmerman, "The Supermarket and the Changing Retail Structure," *Journal of Marketing* 5, no. 4 (1941): 402-409. For a secondary discussion specific to the supermarket's Southern California roots, see: Richard Longstreth, *The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).

³⁹ William Applebaum and David Carson, "Supermarkets Face the Future," *Harvard Business Review* 35, no. 2 (1957): 123-135.

operation were exercises in rationalism. They both used grids as generative systems upon which to build an organizational framework. In modern retailers, the gridiron floor plan with gondolas arranged in long rows transected by smaller perpendicular aisles allowed engineers to direct traffic and increase the amount of products they displayed. For modernist architects, the grid offered a mathematically pure generative system that echoed industrial standardization, and facilitated modularity.⁴⁰ There was not universal agreement on such a strictly rectilinear form as the model for modern supermarkets. Others sought a more inviting atmosphere with a looser layout and more clearly demarcated, even themed departments. Such free-flow designs were also being experimented with in department stores and specialty shops.⁴¹

Linoleum was not breakfast cereal, however, and building product retailers were not supermarket magnates. Modern selling approaches met with some resistance in a retail realm where family-operation and individual service had long been defining characteristics. *Business Week* magazine noted, "Hardware merchants find definite limits on how far they can go in self-service and mass display. . . . [T]he hardware dealer has always had a major function as guide and counselor to his customers. You can't hang advice on the wall or package it neatly in a bottle."⁴²

Yet, this is exactly what more aggressive industry agents (primarily

⁴⁰ Russ Maintain, "Layouts-Hopeful and Helpful," *Super Market Merchandising* (June 1957): 61-64.

⁴¹ "A 'Free' Design for Pleasant Shopping," *Super Market Merchandising* (June 1957): 61-64. Store engineer Russ Maintain, a proponent of the gridiron, criticized the free-flow layout, saying it "wastes space, confuses traffic flow and customers, results in unnecessary walking, reduces sales and control, is more difficult to supervise, causes congestion and bottlenecks, increases costs."

⁴² Quoted in: Tracey Deutsch, "Babes in Consumerland: Supermarkets, Hardware Stores, and the Politics of Postwar Mass Retail," in *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 205.

manufacturers and trade organizations) called for, the packaging of a contemporary selling presentation that moved beyond the quirky and, in some cases alienating, human mediation of the traditional store. Modern store design and operation helped give remodeling retailing a new image that promised greater efficiency, convenience, and integrity. The remodeling project was bundled into a single commodity, the remodeling store, increasingly indistinguishable from other retail establishments, suggested that such commodities be purchased with no more consideration than a new appliance or piece of furniture.

According to the latest merchandising ideas, retail settings were to be immediately readable. Again, this was an extension of modern architecture's supposed expression of honesty through the use of glass, exposed structural systems, and avoidance of traditional ornament. Modern store design was to evince clarity and trustworthiness. Customers were to see the store's complete offerings, to understand its layout and function, at a glance. This sense of transparency and legibility began outside. Existing operations were reconfigured, showrooms and other consumer-focused spaces added, and milling and warehousing operations (if present) moved to the rear of the lot. New stores were built in shopping centers and on important thoroughfares and arteries alongside new suburban developments. A parking area floodlit at night was added in a prominent location and a welcoming doorway installed so that customers knew exactly where to enter (Figure 2.8).

The most distinctive and attention-getting alteration dealers could make to their store exterior was to introduce large floor-to-ceiling windows along its main facade. Six to ten foot tall walls of glass provided ample space for promotion and

signage. All that window space could be enclosed along the sides and backs, in what were referred to as "staged window displays." The area between the glass and the display's back wall was usually filled with seasonally themed products, items rotated on turntables, or even complete bathroom units or kitchen cabinet sets. It was increasingly common, however, to keep any window display close up and low in the windows, leaving an unobstructed view into the store. This arrangement made the entire showroom—orderly and brightly lit, from front entrance to back wall—one large display. Walls of glass, occasionally canted to reduce glare and give the facade a streamlined appearance, emphasized the store's up-to-date image.

Merchandising consultants advised dealers their, "store should be of striking architecture, if possible, so it can be easily identified and long remembered."⁴³ This was sometimes difficult as building product retailers sought to match other modern store designs, and as glass became the primary element of a store facade. When contractor Charles Pokorny expanded his New Buffalo, Michigan, business in 1952 to include a larger showroom with modern glass storefront, drivers passing by confused it with other business types. "While under construction," Pokorny recalled, "three coffee salesmen stopped to inspect the premises under the mistaken impression the building would house a new restaurant; similarly, an automotive executive thought it might be planned as a new automobile salesroom" (Figure 2.9).⁴⁴

As distinctive, one-off lumber and hardware store buildings gave way to standardized glass storefronts, businesses had relied on window lettering and signage

⁴³ "A 10-Point Guide to Successful Retailing: First of a Two-Part Series," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1950): 211.

⁴⁴ "Highway Showroom Builds Sale Traffic," *Domestic Engineering* (June 1952): 124.

as distinguishing features. Because window-shopping increasingly occurred at highway speeds, guidance called for prominent signs visible from hundreds of feet away. To ensure passersby knew what type of business was inside, lettering included not only the name of the firm but the types of products and services offered. Large pylons attracted attention and served as landmarks and mnemonic devices. When signs included moving elements, such as a neon faucet with animated drip running down the sign, they were "doubly effective on the eye and the memory."⁴⁵

Inside, open plans featured islands of pyramidally stacked products and low "gondola" displays and shelves arranged into clearly demarcated departments. Designers relocated offices and other partitions to the back of the store; carts and checkout counters moved near the entrance. Floors were tiled in the latest cheerful pastel shades, said to be especially attractive to women shoppers. The rigorous organization of the floor and wall space was often carried to the ceilings where suspended acoustical tiles and fluorescent fixtures provided a continuous, white, evenly lit plane, interrupted only by the occasional sign and spotlight.

The model was the postwar large-scale grocery store and the contemporary home. Remodeling center walls were lined with uniform repeating rows of paint cans, boxes, and other packaged products; endless rows of paint cans resembled endless rows of canned peas in the modern supermarket aisle (Figure 2.10).⁴⁶ Also like the supermarket shelves stocked with "convenience foods" and cake mixes, these products

⁴⁵ "A 10-Point Guide to Successful Retailing: Second Article of a Two-Part Series," *Domestic Engineering* (December 1950): 113.

⁴⁶ They also resembled the interior of fully-stocked refrigerators featured in advertisements, displays that Sandy Isenstadt has called "visions of plenty." Sandy Isenstadt, "Visions of Plenty: Refrigerators in America Around 1950," *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 4 (1998): 311-321.

were packaged in a manner that facilitated amateur use. Boxes featured step-by-step instructions and photo guides for laying floor tile, priming and painting, and installing shelves.

A common means of domesticating and simplifying formerly un-feminine products and activities was to couch them in the language of the recipe. The Boston Varnish Company, maker of Kyanize Self-Smoothing Paints, developed a "Color Recipe" promotional program shortly after the war. It provided dealers with a "Color Recipe Center" including paint cans stacked like canned vegetables, "Recipe Packets...Displays...and Scrap Books." The company promised dealers that the center would bring new customers to their stores, and promised a clearly female audience that they could obtain "magazine-featured colors."⁴⁷ Similar displays in other stores assured Do-it-Yourselfers that almost any improvement project was within their capabilities. Modern stores tried to reconcile the explosive rise of inventory carried by the contemporary retailer with the need for order and clear lines of sight for the consumer. As one trade magazine reminded its readers "store space is unlimited but variety is unlimited."⁴⁸

The owner of a Rhode Island firm that combined lumber and hardware operations for both homeowners and contractors, stated, "It is the same principle of

⁴⁷ Boston Varnish Co., "Here's How Our Store Cashes in on Kyanize Color Recipes," *American Lumberman* (September 10, 1949), 93. Six years later, one journal was reporting that mothers and daughters were doing almost 33 percent of all interior painting projects themselves. "How Much Paint Can I Sell?" *Hardware Age* (March 3, 1955): 120. Another deployment of recipe rhetoric was Julie Candler's 1967 book *Woman at the Wheel*, a compilation of the *Woman's Day* automotive columnist's earlier articles. According to historian Margaret Walsh, the book was touted as a "'recipe book' for improving motoring skills and vehicle management." See: Margaret Walsh, "Gender and Automobility: Selling Cars to American Women After the Second World War," *Journal of Macromarketing* 31, no. 1 (2011): 61.

⁴⁸ "The Doubtful Logic of Layout," *Super Market Merchandising* (June 1957): 54.

operation used by super food markets that offer housewives, at one stop, meats, fresh vegetables and fruit, canned and frozen foods, baked goods and staple groceries."⁴⁹

One new plumbing and heating retail operation established in a downtown Portland, Maine, building in 1947, typified the modern showroom treatment. Owner H.A. Williams told how his firm "ripped out several partitions and retinted the walls in peach and green, put in a rubber-tiled floor and brilliant white plaster ceiling. Down the length of the showroom, we installed 12 fluorescent, 4-lamp lighting fixtures plus two spotlights in each window to "individualize" the displays. All woodwork was done over in white, and a convenient sales office and counter and was set up near the center."⁵⁰

The modern showroom was efficient and regimented. The *American Lumberman* noted, "Every display, table, rack, shelf, or cabinet is an integrated unit. Each is complete in itself, and should be symmetrical, and not lap over or conflict with any other display."⁵¹ Those stores that joined wholesaler cooperatives such as True Value and Ace were especially emphatic in their uniformity (throughout the store and co-op wide) with consistent signage, displays, pricing, product lines, and advertising.⁵² Cleanliness and order was said to make the customer feel valued and likely to return repeatedly. According to *Domestic Engineering*, the well-kept store gave the customer "an inner feeling of importance-since a slovenly store gives the customer a feeling that

⁴⁹ "Do-It-Yourself Super Marketing," 110.

⁵⁰ "A 10 Point Program for Building Business," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1950): 174.

⁵¹ "The Retail Dealer [history of Lumber Yards]," 100.

⁵² On the manner in which hardware dealers established and entered into wholesaler- organized chains and retailer-owned cooperatives, see: Deutsch, "Babes in Consumerland: Supermarkets, Hardware Stores, and the Politics of Postwar Mass Retail," 203-205.

the owner is in-different to his impressions."⁵³ It also distanced the modern remodeling store from "cracker barrel" hardware and lumber operations of the past. Idiosyncratic organization and haphazard display were replaced by consumer survey-influenced layouts and psychologically tested display techniques. Chance discovery and the emporium model succumbed to rationalization and transparency. Order equaled integrity but also equaled control, control of the store's inventory, the customer's experience, and the employee's demeanor.

How Modern Retailing Functioned

Strategic layouts worked to choreograph the consumer's experience, to draw shoppers through the sales floor. A leading merchandising engineer stated, "Traffic flow should be designed to nourish every department of the store. The more merchandise customers see, and the more departments they visit, naturally the more they will buy."⁵⁴ Building product retail experts advised locating the most popular departments (paint and hardware) toward the back of the store so that shoppers would become familiar with various displays and promotions on offer along the way. The Harris Lumber Company in Providence, Rhode Island, rearranged their retail space in 1946 to better direct customer flow for greater impulse sale opportunities. According to the store manager:

Every customer of the company must come into the hardware department. If a customer only wants some millwork, he must come through the department twice: to the lumber order desk to place his order and to the cashier to pay for

⁵³ "A 10-Point Guide to Successful Retailing: Second Article of a Two-Part Series," 113.

⁵⁴ The engineer continued, claiming that the way to direct traffic flow in the store operator's interest was by "giving customers the fewest possible choices on where to go." Maintain, "Layouts-Hopeful and Helpful," 61.

it. If a customer wants to view model kitchens, or to look at samples of siding or roofing the salesman must escort him through the hardware department. If a customer wants to see the manager, a salesman, or pay a bill, through the hardware department he must go.⁵⁵

Such guidance reasserted control over the space that was lost with the move to self-service, and belied the assertion that such modernization projects were (at least partially) in the name of consumer efficiency and convenience.

Modernized layouts also enabled managers to exercise supervision over their respective departments, to keep an eye on salesmen and customers, inventory and moment-to-moment sales statistics. The Chicago-based Gee Lumber and Coal Company remodeling in 1949 featured an open plan and large display windows. With glass-partitioned offices, the store was "carefully designed to allow department heads complete visibility of the operating area under their respective supervision."⁵⁶ From their desks managers could see what transpired within the showroom, as well as in the parking lot and loading areas. Low islands and fewer and lower partitions also helped prevent theft (an important consideration as merchandise was moved out from behind the counters). Any disorder stood out. More than one trade magazine writer noted that owners were better able to encourage employees to keep freshly painted, white, brightly lit showrooms clean and well maintained. Lastly, dividing their store's inventory by department helped owners and managers to more easily compare product lines in terms of sales performance and consumer interest.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ "Do-It-Yourself Super Marketing," 111.

⁵⁶ "Designed for Merchandising," *American Lumberman* (January 29, 1949): 28.

⁵⁷ Wallace O. Yoder and C. E. Vincent, *Management and Financial Controls for Retail Hardware Stores* (Washington, DC: Small Business Administration, September, 1961), 59.

The effort to exert modern managerial control extended to operations, from sales staff training to bookkeeping, ordering and inventory. Salesmen underwent regular instructional programs organized by the local store management, manufactures, or distributors. Such ad hoc practices as the "want book" described in numerous accounts of older building material stores as a means of informally tracking customer demand were considered out-of-step with up-to-date business operation.⁵⁸ They were increasingly re- placed by rationalized stock control systems that ensured adequate supply of fast-moving items and reduced unnecessary over-stock by identifying and reducing slow moving merchandise. Rationalized inventory procedures moved updated building material stores further from their past as places of unknown content and serendipitous discovery.⁵⁹

All of these modern changes to the retail building products and home improvement store were intended to instill in the consumer feelings of control as well. Relocating products from behind store-length counters to an open sales floor marked an ostensible shift in authority from owners and clerks to consumer. Open, transparent spaces suggested autonomy and a range of options. The marketing expert Pierre Martineau trumpeted changes to retail establishments that made women in particular feel more in command of their shopping experience. In one of his studies, female

⁵⁸ An interview with a prominent Boulder County citizen, John Farr, mentioned the McGuckin Hardware Store in Boulder, and described owner Bill McGuckin's "want book," a steno pad where McGuckin kept a running list of requests for new materials to be stocked by the store. Using the book as a reminder, the owner would check with traveling salesmen making their rounds and find whatever the customers wanted through them. John Farr, "John Farr Oral Interview," Maria Rogers Oral History Program (Boulder, Colorado: Boulder Public Library, July 9, 2009), http://www.boulderlibrary.org/oralHistory/iii_index.cfm?ohid=oh1596 (accessed April 11, 2011). Stores also carried lists of items that were out of stock when customers told them as much.

⁵⁹ See "Controlling Cost" and "Controlling Inventory" chapters in: Yoder and Vincent, *Management and Financial Controls*.

consumers were attracted to a new store that they described as "'clean and white.'"

Martineau noted that it conveyed "a pleasant feeling independence to the shopper. The aisles are spacious and not cluttered."⁶⁰ Products that were clearly marked and arranged could be readily located within the store and their characteristics understood without the aid of employee intermediaries.

Modern sales environments called on consumers to emulate, not literally, but attitudinally, the willingness of remodeling stores to undertake improvements. A modern store makeover served as a statement that the dealer had gotten up-to-date while enjoining the customer to do the same. Retailers wanted the consumer to, like them, break from past, to accept the promise of a better future immediately realized that their stores represented. Trade magazines described how an increasing number of showrooms used air conditioning to show customers that the dealer "practices what he preaches" in terms of adopting new technologies and staying up-to-date.⁶¹ Obviously, cooled stores also kept browsers comfortably browsing in hot weather.

Well-publicized grand openings and giveaway promotions celebrated the dealers "new look," reinforcing a message of progress, novelty, and the benefits of improvement (Figure 2.11).⁶² *Domestic Engineering* noted, "Throughout the lifetime

⁶⁰ Pierre Martineau, "The Personality of the Retail Store", *Harvard Business Review* 36, no. 1 (1958): 47.

⁶¹ "A 10-Point Guide to Successful Retailing: Second Article of a Two-Part Series", 161. While *Domestic Engineering* was an enthusiastic booster of retail air conditioning, research suggests that in 1964 few stores were cooled. Only 14 percent of hardware stores were air conditioned (half the number of grocery stores), though the number for HVAC-oriented retailers (and subscribers to *Domestic Engineering*) was likely higher. Jeff E. Biddle, "Making Consumers Comfortable: The Early Decades of Air Conditioning in the United States," *The Journal of Economic History* 71, no. 04 (2011): 1078-1094.

⁶² This was also a trend shared with supermarkets. The publisher of the trade journal *Super Market Merchandising* noted that supermarkets immediately prior to World War II were trying to draw customers with a range of promotions such as circuses, cooking schools, automobile drawings, and even

of a business, there almost always are opportunities for special event promotions. There's no better time, of course, than at the birth of a new business, or, as is more common, the 're-birth' of a firm with a new showroom, office, etc."⁶³ At such events the modernized store and the means of modernizing the home were intentionally conflated. At the opening of their new showroom in Lancaster, Ohio, the staff of Fairfield Plumbing and Heating Company was "on hand to welcome the guests and escort them through the lavishly decorated premises, answering questions on both the building and the merchandise."⁶⁴

Associating a modernization program with the newly progressive image of the establishment initiating the change was a practice seen in other commercial enterprises as well. When the Merchants Bank and Trust of Norwalk, Connecticut remodeled and expanded their headquarters in 1965, the firm focused a six-month long advertising campaign on the work. Ostensibly, they were meant to warn customers of the disruption and noise that would accompany trips to the bank during the renovation. But the ads (and the renovation) also signaled the bank's departure from a stodgy traditional image. The final advertisement showed the bank president jumping for joy that the work was done, while at the same time updating the bank's public character to one that was informal and fun. The campaign culminated in an open house celebration

public weddings. Store operators had to demonstrate "showmanship of varying graduations ranging up to Hollywood proportions." Zimmerman, "The Supermarket and the Changing Retail Structure," 45.

⁶³ "Special Events Advertising," *Domestic Engineering* (June 1955): 119. Open house celebrations were considered especially effective at conveying a modern (and modernized) theme when the featured up-to-date promotional activities such as television broadcasts.

⁶⁴ "A First Nighter for Mr. Gorsuch," *Domestic Engineering* (September 1952): 92-93, 204.

that showed off the banks "lovely and lively" new building and image.⁶⁵

Recreating Home

The second means of attracting a consumer clientele and making that clientele feel welcome was to introduce a domestic character to spaces within the store (Figure 2.12). Some retailers introduced homey elements throughout the sales floor and showroom in an attempt to warm what were otherwise open warehouse spaces.⁶⁶ Vice president of the California-based supermarket chain Lucky Stores told a trade magazine in 1958 how his company was reworking their store interiors by "using more color in following the in-home trend to brighten colors."⁶⁷ Building product and construction firms turning to the remodeling retailing surrounded modern display layouts with markers of domesticity including paintings, clocks, and curtains hung on wood wall paneling. Knotty pine paneling in particular appears to have been the primary prescription for dealers interested in winning over customers (Figure 2.13). It was a product that many dealers sold, so the walls functioned as a display surface.

Along with decorative wallboards, pine paneling was an obvious remodeling material

⁶⁵ "Remodeling Made Easy—And Fun," *Banking* 58, no. 1 (1965): 70. For a similar campaign in Great Falls, Montana, see: "Remodeling Spurs Humorous Ads," *Banking* 59, no. 12 (1967): 75. A study found that Merchants Bank and Trust and other institutions were right to devote attention and resources to a remodeling or new construction project. Rates of deposit increased after such work compared to non-remodeled competitors, and the revised physical plant was especially attractive to newcomers. Charles L. Monnot and R. Curtis Hamm, "Do New Buildings Attract Deposits?" *Banking* 60, no. 2 (1967): 110-111.

⁶⁶ The contemporary understanding of homey settings was examined by anthropologist Grant McCracken in: Grant McCracken, "'Homeyness' A Cultural Account of One Constellation of Consumer Goods and Meanings," in *Interpretive Consumer Research*, ed. E. C. Hirschman (New York: Association for Consumer Research, 1989), 168-183. His subjects defined homey character as residing in the smallest decorative element to the house as a whole. Homeyness was marked by warm colors, natural fabrics and finishes, objects that have personal significance, or that are informal or playful, and arrangements that combine diverse styles in a single room. Homeyness has a "know-it-when-you-see-it" character, it is defined in part by its indeterminacy, its "intangible, illusive quality that can be difficult to define or achieve." *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁷ "Stress Is on Spaciousness," *Supermarket News* (October 6, 1958): 41.

easily sold to owners whose interior plaster walls required considerably more work than just a paint or wallpaper job. Knotty pine was said to harmonize with a variety of bathroom and kitchen fixtures and colors. Because of its homey connotations, it was considered especially appealing to women. A journal profile of the 1954 remodeling of the C. H. Lacey, Inc. showroom in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, noted that knotty pine walls provided "a warm finish in keeping with Lacey's idea of making women feel at home while they do the nation's buying." The entire Lacey showroom was designed specifically with the intent of appealing to women shoppers. According to the trade journal profile, it featured, "natural light, bright interior decor and feminine 'trimmings' like draperies and floral arrangements to draw the housewives. Complete kitchen and bathroom displays in these surroundings give the housewife a picture of how the fixtures would appear at home."⁶⁸

Efforts by Lacey and others to develop approaches they thought would attract women shoppers were akin to those of automobile manufacturers and advertisers, who originally did so on a predominantly visual basis. They sought links between their products and the traditional Drawing from traditional female bailiwicks of fashion and interior design. Chrysler Motor Corporation's, 1955 Dodge La Femme, for example, was constructed like other cars but had a white and pink and then two-toned orchid exterior. The Femme's other "distinctively feminine" features included pastel rose fabric interiors and a storage compartment for matching umbrella, hat, and shoulder bag that came with the car. Phased out in 1957, one historian called the design "a

⁶⁸ "Attract the Feminine Trade, Says Lacey," *Domestic Engineering* (February 1954): 159.

whimsical ploy rather than a realistic sales tool.⁶⁹

Introducing symbolically domestic elements like paneling and curtains was a way for remodeling retailers to hedge the bet on wholesale modernization, to mitigate the more anonymous and cold excesses of the rationalized showroom. One merchandising study presented a cautionary tale regarding the dangers of modernizing retail settings. After a local department store updated its women's apparel section replacing a conservative and traditionally decorated space with modern fixtures, lighting and contemporary styling, the store's income declined immediately. A consultant concluded that the changes had made the previously distinctive establishment "indistinguishable from any other store" and called for a return of the traditional setting.⁷⁰ Building material dealers, like those who ran women's apparel departments, needed to be mindful of the image that their store projected and ensure that it was one shared by its clients, current and desired. The use of homey features to counteract modern store design was considered especially important for those remodeling businesses located in rural regions. *American Lumberman* cautioned that "Too much sparkle" makes rural customers "afraid to enter the front door for fear of dirtying up the store."⁷¹

Retailers also reproduced a domestic atmosphere in their stores by creating separate home-like spaces distinct from the open sales floor. Consumers were primed

⁶⁹ *By Appointment to Her Majesty...The American Woman: La Femme by Dodge* (Detroit: Dodge Division, Chrysler Motor Corporation January, 1955), 2. Margaret Walsh, "Gender and Automobility: Selling Cars to American Women After the Second World War." *Journal of Macromarketing* 31, no. 1 (2011): 62.

⁷⁰ Martineau, "The Personality of the Retail Store", 50.

⁷¹ "Retail Management," 126.

for such settings by the increasing postwar practice of setting up complete model rooms homes within department stores. Macy's and Bloomingdale's established full-scale interior rooms on their sales floors as settings to display the stores' selections of furnishings, fabrics, and other household items.⁷² Conference rooms and consultation rooms were regularly included in remodeled and new home improvement center designs. Such spaces were often decorated living room-like with couches, easy chairs, and coffee tables (Figure 2.14). Finishes were often of materials—plywood and plank wall panels, acoustic ceiling tiles, wood, roll, and tile flooring—that the retailer also sold, so that the room served as a physical, built-in, sample room.⁷³ So-called "Idea Rooms" were stocked with product samples, catalogs, and other product literature that the salesman and prospect could review. The dealer's salesmen, or in some cases contractors and homebuilders who would bring customers to the store to make fixture and finish selections, used these spaces. A sales training guide for paint dealers published in 1958 by the National Paint, Varnish and Lacquer Association recommended a consultation space set off from the main sales floor. "In a pleasant corner or nook, you might install an inviting table with chairs that will permit customers (especially women) to relax and take their time in comfort while looking over charts and deciding on paint selections. Call this table your 'Color Bar' and include color panels, samples of painted surfaces, decorating ideas, magazines on decorating the home, and accessory items that deal with painting and decorating"

⁷² Smiley, "Making the Modified Modern," 40.

⁷³ For example, see: "New Conference Room Sells Many Jobs," *American Lumberman* (August 26, 1950): 37.

(Figure 2.15).⁷⁴ The color bar concept dated back at least to 1938 when the New York City furnishings retailer W. & J. Sloane's introduced one alongside seven decorated model rooms in the Smaller Homes Shop on the second floor of their Fifth Avenue store. Around that same time Hecht's department store in Washington, DC introduced a similar bar in their furniture department to help customers select rugs.⁷⁵

Sloane's color bar and model rooms were intended to "cut down materially the time of the customer in choosing a room color scheme." Postwar versions were also designed to entice customers to relax, be comfortable, and stick around. They were settings separated from the sales floor where customers could mull over choices and the character of their remodeling project with tactful guidance by the seller. Enticing the customer to spend more time in the store by providing an intimate space to choose and plan the components of the project was assumed to make them more invested as authors of the project and thus more likely to sign a contract.

Built-in, full-size display models set into floor to ceiling bays or entirely separate rooms were the most common means of recreating a home-like setting within the remodeling store. In remodeling stores, complete kitchen settings featured installed cabinets, appliances, flooring, wall tile, even plants in the window overlooking a painted backyard scene. Bathrooms showed the latest in tile colors and combinations,

⁷⁴ *Hidden Power: Sales Training Program for Dealers and Dealers' Clerks: Tips on In-Store Selling* (Washington, DC: National Paint, Varnish and Lacquer Association, October, 1958), 12. Chicago-based Martin-Senour Co. was one of the biggest promoters of Color Bars.

⁷⁵ A 1938 advertisement in the *New Yorker* described the model rooms and bar stating, "Sloane did each of these rooms in key colors (walls and carpets) to show you the score of different effects you can ring with changes of fabrics and accessories. We established an intriguing new color bar right on the spot where you can try wall shade, carpet color, draperies and upholstery fabrics together." Both Sloane's and the Hecht's color bars are discussed in: "Color Bar Makes Ensemble Selling Easier," *Furniture Record* 75, no. 1 (1939): 22, 28.

toilets, shower enclosures, curtains, and mats. Some stores featured full-size exterior facades that showcased siding products, as well as windows, front and screen doors, wrought-iron railings and columns, mailboxes, and address numbers (Figure 2.16). The more detail incorporated into these models the better—two wall displays were superior to single wall displays, three walls were better than two, operating appliances and toilets that flushed all contributed to the model's authenticity and ability to immerse the customer in a persuasive domestic idyll (Figure 2.17).

Homey retail environments served several functions. Most explicitly, the model room illustrated how a new material, appliance, or feature would appear as installed (Figure 2.18). It operated like an "after" in the before and after image pairings used so often in home improvement promotion, concealing time, expense, and effort expended on a renovation project. Additionally, models were thought to stimulate two trends central to postwar remodeling merchandising, package sales and upselling, in ways similar to departmentalization. On a more emotional level, domestic settings within the remodeled store were thought to soothe the customer, and to prompt direct emulation by presenting an idealized vision of the home.

Complete packages, the origins of which can be traced to early twentieth century precut house kits, took a complicated project that normally required negotiating separate features, prices, and schedules with a variety of players, and narrowed it down to a single product that a single supplier provided at a single price. A packaged kitchen remodeling, for example, usually included removing the old sink, cabinets, and heavy appliances, as well as the new cabinets, appliances, floor and wall coverings, and the necessary gas, electric, and water hookups. Such packages were a

way for dealers to ensure they weren't missing out on any potential remodeling profits. Plumbing contractors were no longer content to just connect new equipment. Building product retailers didn't want to just sell the materials and let other reap installation earnings and the chance to get valuable (potentially selling) time in the home of the consumer. *American Lumberman* cautioned retailers that, "The dealer who advertises decorating ideas but fails to provide the entire service is paying for developing business that may be enjoyed by a competitor."⁷⁶

Model rooms, as well as idea rooms and other domestically decorated spaces within the store, had corollaries in supermarket and department store design. Some stores, such as Shores Super Markets in Providence, Rhode Island, tried out what they called "alcove merchandising," the creation of a series of bays along the store perimeter to display packaged goods and alleviate bottlenecks (Figure 2.19). As the fifties moved into the sixties, supermarkets increasingly featured themed service spaces such as "hospitality bars" and "kiddie corners" that encouraged customer dawdling and specialty areas such as flower shops and bakeries.⁷⁷ Department stores increasingly adopted what merchandising experts called "corner shops." The term reveals how these themed nooks within larger retail spaces attempted to co-opt the familiarity and distinctiveness of a neighborhood store operated by an individual proprietor. Designers place corner shops along the back wall of a department or larger retail store where they provided a whimsical and individualized setting within a larger,

⁷⁶ "The Home Decorating Package," *American Lumberman* (1949): 99.

⁷⁷ "Grocery Bays: A Novel Layout Dimension," *Super Market Merchandising* (June 1957): 76.

orderly layout.⁷⁸ One visual merchandising expert noted the value of such marked off spaces "that relieve the sameness of departmental furnishings." Corner shops, according to the expert, "lend color to the appearance of the department, and they often become meeting places for customers." While the customer browses, a clerk "might start a friendly conversation with her."⁷⁹

The model remodeling room displaying an updated kitchen, bath or finished basement functioned in ways similar to the department store's "corner shop." Both were set up as idealized representations of real environments intended to be a relaxing departure from the regimentation of the modern sales floor. They presented an assembly of related products often arranged into suggested packages (new shower enclosures with mats, curtains, rods, or flooring and wall and ceiling panels for the finished basement). Employees assigned to such settings were trained in the soft, friendly sell, to be conversational and to avoid overt pressure. The informality and familiarity of these spaces was also intended to get the customer to ease their guard and to browse freely.⁸⁰

Because they recreated benign and hospitable domestic environments, model room displays could be especially effective tools to disarm shoppers. These were not foreign spaces ruled by a particular gender or possessors of insider skills or knowledge, but instead were recognizable settings that looked like any up-to-date

⁷⁸ Macy's Corner Shop was a section of the department store dedicated to the presentation and sale of antiques. Decorated like the cluttered living room of an old aunt, the space was said to offer "Old World Charm in the world's largest store." The quote is from a 1930s postcard, a copy of which is in the files of the author.

⁷⁹ Mauger, *Modern Display Techniques*, 25.

⁸⁰ Such model rooms were also common in wholesale retailing. The hundreds of showrooms modeled after bedrooms, living rooms, offices, and kitchens as settings to present furnishings and materials in Chicago's Merchandise Mart (completed in 1930) being the most prominent example.

living room or kitchen (Figure 2.20). They also countered the implication of modernist store layouts that the customer should “hurry up” and to be as efficient in shopping as the shop was efficiently laid out. The model kitchen, the domestically-decorated idea/conference room, were places to take one's time in an eased state that dealers thought would make customers more willing to buy. Using layouts and finishes and dedicated bays and rooms decorated to evoke the remodeled home, the retail showroom functioned as a rhetorical device telling the customer “this is what you can have.” They were to get consumers to see these interior spaces as ones that they wanted to copy, literally, to have in their homes. They functioned like a more modest version of the full-size model homes that were a staple of new housing developments and home shows.

The persuasive power of these models was enhanced by their ostensible ordinariness, their function as simulacra of real spaces. Model remodeling rooms were uncanny representations of the domestic. Freud situated the uncanny within the domestic realm; it is “unheimlich” or the opposite of homey, familiar, and recognizable.⁸¹ The sensation of uncanniness emerges when the familiar was encountered as the unfamiliar and vice versa. The model room was familiar as a seemingly ordinary room, but unfamiliar, in its locale and its openness. If the house (as discussed earlier in this work) was an analog to the human body, these display

⁸¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McClintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003). Freud's discussion is embedded in aesthetics and literary criticism, but architectural scholars have also examined how the uncanny manifests in domestic environments, in contemporary neo-constructivist design, and the modern metropolis. Anthony Vidler, for example, sees the uncanny as a “metaphor for a fundamentally unlivable modern condition.” Anthony Vidler, “The Architecture of the Uncanny,” in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), x.

kitchens and model bathrooms, cut out and dislocated, are the body dismembered, a notion that Freud claimed evoked the uncanny. Representations of domestic spaces that were enclosed and private, model kitchens and bathrooms were missing walls, open to the public, facing store windows and the streets beyond. This strange familiarity intrigues and invites.

Mady Schutzman has examined the function of the uncanny in advertising, which also provides insights into the attractive power of uncanny model spaces. She first quotes Freud's essay:

An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something we hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.

Then Schutzman states that "Advertising creates a virtual reality to substitute for and complement experienced reality. It relies on animism, an investment in an image or inanimate thing to awaken something repressed, something still alive but starved."⁸²

The virtual reality of the model room was an idealized one intended to instill desire through a mental transposition of the space from the retail outlet to the consumer's home. It appealed to a yearning for the exemplary, bountiful, prosperous home life that it represented. The casual familiarity of the model room concealed what was actually a carefully constructed presentation of flawless domesticity. The spaces were immaculate, without dishes in the sink, cigarette burns on the Formica, pee on the seat, crying children, or aloof spouse. They were a mirage, a carefully constructed

⁸² Mady Schutzman, *The Real Thing: Performance, Hysteria, and Advertising* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), 134.

amalgam of "merchandising know-how," and surveys and psychological studies said to reveal true consumer preferences and facilitate consumption.

Model remodeling rooms also served as stand-ins for a visit to the home of a previous customer who could vouch for the wisdom of the purchase and the integrity of the dealer. The advice of "satisfied customers" was increasingly deployed in advertising and promotional campaigns at the time and a common dealer strategy was to proffer a list of former clients whom prospects could call upon.⁸³ Meeting previous (ostensibly objective) customers and seeing fixtures, materials, and assemblies installed in a remodeled home, could give that last boost of assurance to uncertain shoppers. Built-in showroom models had the advantage over in-house visits of giving engendered desire a convenient and proximate means of satiation.⁸⁴ While showroom models lacked a genuine satisfied customer permanently ensconced in the store, other parties, of varying degrees of impartiality could substitute: the in-house design or planning expert, the decorator, or more commonly, the salesman trained in the art of chumminess and possessing a amiable demeanor. Thus, the model room operated as a stage set within the store upon which customer and salesman could play out a performance of neighborly persuasion and consumption (Figure 2.21).

The Sense of Selling

⁸³ "Satisfied Customer" rhetoric appeared as either actual past customers who could attest to the value and quality of a firm and the remodeling projects and products they offered, as well as a more general depiction of a customer with whom prospects could associate and trust. Satisfied customers and word-of-mouth were said to be the biggest single source for remodeling leads. "Identify Your Business As Remodeling Headquarters," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1953): 118.

⁸⁴ Several trade magazine articles mention the pitfalls of bringing new customers to the homes of past customers who, though they may have been pleased with the work done, could never be fully depended upon to say the right thing at the right time. Despite the unpredictability of such encounters, the benefits of hearing an installation or dealer praised from an impartial party outweighed any risks.

Threaded throughout the discussion above is the consistent attempt by retailers to curate shopping experiences that evoked among their customers a positive sensory response. This was done through both a careful construction of the store's layout and sensual character as partially described earlier in this chapter. Retailers also did it by using the building materials and features themselves as objects that stirred a positive sensory response. The arrangement of product display islands obligated consumers to walk around them, the placement of the most popular items in the rear required that shoppers move through (and thus be exposed to) the entire store before reaching what they came for. Departments put related products within eyesight so that a customer in search of a new faucet would also see garbage disposers and sink-cabinet units, boosting the chance for impulse sales.

Remodeling stores also made contact with the products and assessing their nature a central element of the shopping experience. By the time the home improvement retail outlet was well established in the 1970s, store operators recognized the crucial importance of sensory appeals. One guide to creative home improvement selling told retailers to "Reach as many of the buyer's senses as you can. Let him SEE the styling. Let him TOUCH and FEEL the solid workmanship that has been built into your product. He can "HEAR" the solid construction of the walls and floor you might use. When you finish, he can practically "TASTE" his ownership of your beautiful new home."⁸⁵

This emphasis on the sensory character of the store environment and its

⁸⁵ *Creative Selling: A Guide to Success for Home Improvement Sales Professionals* (New York: C.I.T. Financial Services, 1977), 51.

products on offer enabled retailers to hit both rationally and emotionally persuasive selling points. Price, functionality and durability were primary motivations for most remodeling consumers. They needed (and wanted) to be convinced that a new exterior siding would make future painting projects unnecessary or that a new kitchen layout would save time and energy. Sensory-focused sales pitches could confirm in the customer's mind that such investments were sound and fiscally prudent. By sliding their hands along the countertops, feeling the linoleum beneath their feet, or the reverberation of the garbage disposer, by seeing the water jets spraying the glass-lidded dishwasher, and by registering the quiet operation of nylon drawer slides, the customer could put to rest questions of quality and value and justify a home improvement purchase. The Republic Steel Company's "Buy on Proof!" customer brochure and "Sell on Proof" sales training folder was just one example of the way companies integrated a message of thoughtful sensual evaluation into their remodeling promotional activities.⁸⁶

Yet as the reference to taste in the quote above suggests, sense-focused remodeling promotion was also innately emotion based. Postwar merchandisers saw the solicitation of sensual desire and the creation of visceral want as primary objectives. Shining stores of new products in the latest colors, patterns and materials (mirroring what was being described as up-to-date in mass-market shelter magazines) spoke to a subconscious desire for the new and fashionable. At the same time, that variety allowed customers the chance to mix, match, and select components and

⁸⁶ Both were part of the companies "Most for your Money" consumer campaign that put the financial sense of remodeling at the forefront of its pitch.

finishes that they thought reflected their highly individual taste. Displays with whirling parts, materials in trendy shades, model rooms that were comfortable and inviting all worked to seduce the customer to reduce rational impediments. This approach was in line with the latest motivational psychological studies that identified an American population increasingly making purchases based on emotional appeals and the promise of personal expressiveness through consumption.⁸⁷

Attention to the shoppers' sensorium can be seen as an effort to counter or at least mitigate the de-sensitization of the modern retail environment. The old hardware store or lumber dealer was not inclined to explicitly appeal to the senses. Before cellophane packaging, the cool hum of florescent lighting, and Muzak sanitized the retail experience, shopping was an innately sensual experience.⁸⁸ Starting with an emotionally neutral tabula rasa, modern retailers built up and tuned the sensory experience of their shoppers, creating points of visual interest and bodily stimulation meant to lure and seduce.

The L. M. Hamm outlet in Alhambra, California, featured what was probably one of the most colorful working display kitchens in the industry. "The vivid \$1,800 working display, with its powder blue range, lavender cabinets and sink stand, blue-speckled Formica and checked bluish-purple wallpaper, set off against a black linoleum floor, acts as a 'come hither' to lookers."⁸⁹ Store design experts worked to

⁸⁷ See: Ernest Dichter, "The American Home Has Become the Center of Emotional Satisfaction" (unpublished manuscript, Institute for Motivational Research, Inc., Croton-on Hudson, New York, April 19, 1956).

⁸⁸ Once the customer got past the display counter and the stock clerk's mediation.

⁸⁹ "He Lets Customers Sell Themselves...well Almost!" *Domestic Engineering* (September 1953): 96-98, 249, 251.

assure retailers fearful of alienating their traditional customers that colorful appeals could also interest tradespeople. *The American Lumberman* claimed that, "dealers who have developed a salesroom and sales program to meet the requirements of the feminine customer have found that, strange as it may seem, the contractor and craftsman are also attracted and influenced by these same requirements. In a broad sense, therefore, it isn't only the woman who is moved by pleasing colors to buy. She is the only one who admits it."⁹⁰

One well-publicized way to attract the consumer's eye was with displays that moved. Retailers, most notably car dealers, had long used movement in signage and displays to attract attention and represent their products in motion.⁹¹ Rotating turntables, set in front of the store's display windows or placed on the sales floor, drew the attention passersby and offered more space to highlight more products (Figure 2.22). Stressing their reliance upon showmanship, turntables and other kinetic displays were often described in cinematic and theatrical terms.⁹² It was a dramatic presentation that consumer's might have seen on a larger scale at car shows or World Fair presentations, the new product elevated to iconic status, turning slowly before a crowd of admiring onlookers. More modest kinetic displays were also used, such as the placement of streamers and flags above a fan that made them dance in the display window.

While turntables and flapping signs had an arresting allure, the most

⁹⁰ "Selling Home Decorating," 122.

⁹¹ Robert Genat, *The American Car Dealership* (St. Paul, Minn.: MBI Publishing, 2004), 49.

⁹² For example, one article describing turntable displays had a caption titled "Lights! Action!" "Idea File: Eye-Catching Display Catches the Customers," *Domestic Engineering* (May 1955): 23.

compelling and effective visually oriented displays were the live demonstration aids that showed how a product or piece of equipment functioned. Such displays could be as simple as a collection of faucet heads illustrating their varying pressure and spray patterns with water running through a continuous pump (Figure 2.23). Live demonstrations were used most frequently with products that were innovative but unfamiliar to consumers (such as garage door openers), and products that had their operation concealed within pipes and enclosures (such as garbage disposers).⁹³ "Cutaway" models revealed the inner workings of non-operating appliances. Plexiglas molded parts provided a see-through view while retaining the exterior form and permitting the model to function as normal. The Kitchen-Laundry department showroom at Central Lumber Company in Stockton, California, for example, featured several live demonstration displays including a glass-topped dishwasher and a garbage unit with glass pipes that allowed prospective customers the chance to witness the "the effectiveness of the working parts."⁹⁴ A plumbing firm in Pasadena, CA featured a "floor model disposer with transparent piping and drains, which demonstrates to the housewife exactly how various foods are ground up."⁹⁵ The manufacturer American Kitchens offered franchisees a glass "magic door" for their Roto-Tray dishwasher that

⁹³ This was not a new technique in promoting and explaining new complicated technologies and machinery. Automobile exhibits at the New York and San Francisco World's Fairs featured cars with plastic body panels that revealed the inner workings and construction of the car. New clear materials like Plexiglas that could be shaped and molded were used in models to provide a "cut away" view while maintaining the object's form. The Fisher Body Company used Plexiglas car panels in prewar exhibits at the New York and San Francisco World's Fairs. *Plexiglas Crystal-Clear Plastic* (Philadelphia: Rohm and Haas Company, 1948), 30.

⁹⁴ "Kitchen Sales Are Profit Sales: Package Kitchens Are Big Business," *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): 50.

⁹⁵ "Journeyman Can Be Your Best Salesmen," *Domestic Engineering* (January 1952): 122.

"snaps in place, turns dishwasher into a demonstration model in 30 seconds."⁹⁶ This visual access to the interior of an appliance or house ware was carried to the design of off-the-shelf products as well. Ovens got glass-paneled doors, pots got glass lids. The Youngstown Jet-Tower automatic dishwasher, introduced in 1950, featured a porthole in the top so that the washing and rinsing process would be transparent and observable (Figure 2.24). The unit's 64 jet "Hydro-Brush Action" vigorously splashing water against the window provided confirmation that the washer was a powerful cleaner but gentle enough to not damage its contents. Visual accessibility demystified the operation of these tools, reduced the steps in checking on the status of food or wash, and set one model apart in the consumer's mind from the competitors.⁹⁷

See-through functioning demonstration aids unveiled the secret inner workings of high technology and began the process of its domestication. Large appliances with oversized plugs, motors, and compressors, garbage disposers with grinding gears were rendered explicable and harmless on the inviting stage of the showroom. The efficacy of model kitchens, bathrooms and other domestic spaces in the store also drew on this demonstrative allure. Those considered most effective were hooked up so the appliances functioned and the toilets flushed. Making models functional increased their verisimilitude, persuasive power, and utility (wired model kitchens, for example,

⁹⁶ "Now is the Time to Get Into the Dishwasher Business with the New American Kitchens Roto-Tray Dishwasher" Advertisement. *Domestic Engineering* (June 1952).

⁹⁷ Live sales floor displays could be especially memorable if coupled with a customer giveaway. In 1950, Youngstown Kitchens distributed to prospects 28,000 miniature versions of their new Jet-Tower dishwasher. The plastic models included plates and silverware at the same scale. By loading the washer with the dinnerware, and then connecting a hose that came out of the back of the model to a kitchen faucet, water pressure would spin the tower and demonstrate how the washer functioned. "Announcing the New Youngstown Kitchens Jet-Tower Dishwasher" Advertisement. *Domestic Engineering* (August 1950): 16-17.

were used to host baking classes).

Second in importance to sight in the remodeled store was the sense of touch. From the French *grands magasins* of the latter nineteenth century to early twentieth century variety stores such as Woolworth's, new self- and semi-self-service retail establishments made haptic opportunities and haptic seductions central to the shopping experience.⁹⁸ This trend became ubiquitous in postwar marketing. Among the best-known commercial characters in television history is Mr. Whipple, which Proctor & Gamble introduced in 1964. Whipple was a store manager who admonished his customers to not squeeze the Charmin toilet paper packages, yet couldn't resist doing so himself when unobserved. The advertising campaign played on consumers' need and desire to evaluate haptically the qualities of a product. Despite Mr. Whipple's false protestations, tactile encounters between customer and product were encouraged, both in the modern grocery store and the modern remodeling store.⁹⁹

Touching the increasingly ubiquitous product samples located throughout the showroom and homey idea center provided a way to become acquainted with a material, to prove that the edges of a new steel cabinet were not sharp, that a floor tile was durable, that a carpet was non-abrasive. When clothes dryers first appeared on the

⁹⁸ Constance Classen notes the benefits of consumer touching in early department stores, stating, "While increasing the risk of theft and damage, allowing customers to handle the merchandise promoted sales. It did so by creating a bond of attachment between customer and product, and more subtly by creating a bond of attachment between customer and product. An article one has held in one's hands is harder to leave unpurchased than an article one had simply seen. Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Champaign, Ill. University of Illinois Press, 2012), 193.

⁹⁹ While large-scale retailers around the world increasingly embraced self-service in the postwar era, it was in the United States especially, where even small independent store owners turned widely to open store models with accessible products. To the present many neighborhood stores in Europe, Asia and the developing world still have counters and clerks mediating experiences between product and consumer. For a brief review of touch and marketing, see: Joann Peck, "Does Touch Matter? Insights From Haptic Research in Marketing," in *Sensory Marketing: Research on the Sensuality of Products*, ed. Aradhna Krishna (Routledge, 2009), 17-31.

market, appliance stores set up 'touch exhibits' that allowed potential buyers to feel the difference between towels dried on a clothesline and those in a drier. Strategically ordered displays were thought to encourage the desire to touch. Low island fixtures and shelving brought products into reach, so that customers could easily grasp them. As one journal noted, "The impression should be given that all merchandise displayed is accessible—obtainable by reaching out and picking it up."¹⁰⁰ The miniature kitchen design kits to be discussed in chapter 4, were also a component of the touch selling campaign. Often a feature of the "planning center" or full-size model room, the kits invited customers to play, rearranging the scale counter and cabinet blocks in a personalized composition over which that they felt authorship.

Direct tactile assessment of a product's qualities by the consumer distinguished the contemporary shopping experience from earlier forms where counters and sales staff mediated contact. Store designers also thought that touching put consumers closer to ownership. One remodeled hardware store in Princeton, New Jersey, placed price tags on every item individually rather than a single price tag on the shelf or bin holding the items. The store's manager explained, "we believe that people picking up an item to check the price are less likely to put it down if they think the price is right."¹⁰¹ This was "fingertip selling," arranging the store and all its displays to signal

¹⁰⁰ "The Retail Dealer [history of Lumber Yards]," 100.

¹⁰¹ "180,000 Potential Customers," *Hardware Age* (January 20, 1955): 106. This faith in the power of touch to incite in consumers a sense of pre-sale ownership still figures in retailing today. In perhaps the quintessential early twenty-first century outlet, the Apple Store, the screens of display laptops were purposefully set at an angle requiring consumers to adjust them to an ideal viewing angle. *The Atlantic* magazine noted that, "Apple wants you to touch stuff, to play with it, to make it your own. Its notebook computers are tilted at just the right angle to beckon you to their screens — and, more importantly, to their keyboards. Come on in, they say. The trackpad's fine." Megan Garber, "The Screen of Each Laptop in the Apple Store Is Set to the Exact Same Angle," *Atlantic*, June 17, 2012.

to the customer that products could and should be handled.¹⁰²

For some products, it was the display rather than the customer that reached out and touched. Air conditioning units blew cool air into the aisles on hot summer days. Those dealers who sold baseboard-heating systems were told by *Domestic Engineering* magazine to take a tip from Robert Adams's store in Philadelphia. The plumbing and remodeling retailer increased baseboard heater sales by installing operating units in high traffic areas. Adams stated, "Curiosity might have killed the cat, but it certainly never killed a sale! We see to it that the customer's curiosity is aroused by the heat that comes from someplace around the ankles, and then we sell him as we answer his questions" (Figure 2.25).¹⁰³

The full-size model room was the ideal form of immersive, sensory-based selling tool, where the desire to touch could most fully be satisfied. In the model kitchen, prospects were encouraged to touch surfaces and open and close doors, to get that reassuring tactile feeling that can't be obtained any other way. At building center display kitchens, "Mrs. Prospect is encouraged to slam of steel cabinets, and to tap for herself to see they are not "tinny."¹⁰⁴ The operable, touchable model was a narrative device, able to tell physical stories. By seeing the full-scale model in action, or by activating it herself, the housewife was supposed to more easily envision it installed in her home, skipping past the decisions, negotiation, check signing, appointment

<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/06/the-screen-of-each-laptop-in-the-apple-store-is-set-to-the-exact-same-angle/258592/>. Accessed June 18, 2012.

¹⁰² The phrase "fingertip selling" appeared in the article: "The Bigger They Come . . . the Better They Sell," *Domestic Engineering* (December 1955): 96.

¹⁰³ John Adams, "Now That You Have a New Store or Are Planning to Build One . . . Here's How to Keep It Selling," *Domestic Engineering* (December 1951): 85.

¹⁰⁴ "587 Kitchens Ain't Hay," 62.

scheduling, and the other minutia of a major home intervention.

Enticing showrooms, tactile product samples, and immersive model rooms were potent merchandising tools. They offered customers close contact with new products that satisfied their rational reservations while displaying those products in a compelling manner that forged emotional connections and desires. Dealers had only to ensure that such tools were not so sensual as to detract from their ultimate purpose of closing sales. At the Czerwiec lumber and home improvement store in Chicago, George Smith experimented with including a cooking demonstration in his promotional meetings, but the appealing smells proved distracting to the potential customers, making them disinclined to think about remodeled kitchens. "The warm odors of good food," says Smith, "just don't help you to sell building materials."¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Re-imagining the postwar building product and remodeling store offered new opportunities but also carried risk. Customers (present and potential) had well-established perceptions of how the traditional hardware and lumber dealer operated and to whom they catered. Owners willing to embrace a new retail model had to gauge their existing customers' readiness to accept that change and the likelihood that such changes would attract new customers. As retailers in other sectors likewise modernized and reworked their image, marketing experts cautioned them on the need to identify and work within their establishment's public identity. Marketing scholar Pierre Martineau wrote that store managers and operators had to recognize which

¹⁰⁵ "Kitchen Sales Are Profit Sales: Czerwiec's Sells Kitchens," *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): 55.

portion of the population—social class, age group, gender—found their store enticing and inviting. His research suggested that shoppers self-stratified and only frequented stores where they felt comfortable. "The shopper seeks the store whose image is most congruent with the image she has of herself. Some stores may intimidate her; others may seem beneath her."¹⁰⁶

Managers who thought their stores could attract both genders and all classes suffered, according the Martineau, the "illusion of mass appeal." Yet, remodeling retailers sought to develop spaces that did transcend or at least blur, traditional distinctions among customers (distinctions that worked well for department and clothing store retailers like Sears and Marshall Field). They endowed their new stores with an identity meant to draw new consumers unaccustomed to shopping for building and home improvement products, to women, to white collar men, to carpenters and plumbers, to the well-off seeking a complete interior make over, and the young family who wanted to wallpaper room before the arrival of a first child.¹⁰⁷ Getting shelving off the wall and making those walls—with wood finishes, clocks and curtains—appear less like those of a storehouse and more like those in a living room, dealers tried to combine casual, traditional store flavor with the efficiencies and regularity of a modernized setting.

By introducing both modern and comfortingly traditional elements, up-to-date building product merchandisers sought to transcend the traditional identification of

¹⁰⁶ Martineau, "The Personality of the Retail Store", 48.

¹⁰⁷ At the same time, supermarkets were also trying to broaden their appeal to other demographics, men most notably. See: Adam Mack, "'Good Things to Eat in Suburbia': Supermarkets and American Consumer Culture, 1930-1970" (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 2006), 48.

their stores as dedicated to and frequented by a trade-based, male clientele. By putting forth both rational justifications for the wisdom of remodeling, as well as appeals to emotional, visceral desires, dealers hoped to attract a broad cross-section of the shopping public.¹⁰⁸ Sales force training programs instructed clerks and salesmen to put customers at ease with a combination of informality tempered by professionalism. Hanging out and chewing the fat gave way to a systematic, at times scripted, sales approach intended to quickly home in on the customer's wants and to fulfill them with the product lines at hand. Open, modern showrooms inspired by contemporary supermarkets reduced the explicit class and gendered image expressed by earlier hardware and lumber outlets. Homey model rooms and meeting spaces encouraged slow browsing in the comforting semblance of home. Neither shockingly new, nor disconcertingly traditional, the remodeled remodeling store aimed to appeal to middle tastes without alienating those above and below.

New stores that had rationalized and modernized were explicitly self-conscious in the expression of an image. They strived for what experts called a "studied informality."¹⁰⁹ Old stores were innately casual and incidentally shaped by the personality of their owner. The owner's relationship with the customer, with his employees, and with his suppliers was crucial in how the store was perceived and operated. While this factor remained important, modern stores increasingly diminished the importance of the proprietor as a focus of the store's identity, especially as more

¹⁰⁸ Martineau argued that lower-class shoppers were driven to purchase by appeals to practicality and functionality and durability, while upper class consumers were motivated to purchase if the object reinforced a perceived status and style of life.

¹⁰⁹ "A New Store Is No Ticket to the Gravy Train," *American Lumberman* (October 9, 1948): 79.

remodeling retailers fully embraced chain store approaches (where the owner's identity was unknown and irrelevant), as more stores established branch operations, and (later) as larger stores bought out smaller ones. The unpretentious nature of the traditional building material supplier was replaced by an intentional, carefully crafted personality. As one journal article advised, "Every retail store has a personality. It should be a planned one, designed to appeal to that particular segment of the population to which the store caters."¹¹⁰ Here, the postwar remodeling store showed another parallel with the postwar homeowner. Their respective advisors (manufacturers, trade and mass-market magazines) told both told incessantly about the importance of their personality and their identity. The physical make up of the store—its signage, layout, use of color, product lines—and the physical make up of the home—its layout, kitchen cabinet and wallpaper selection, exterior siding—was a primary means of expressing this identity. Stores, as with people, could and should reinvent themselves regularly in a self-conscious process in which intuition was informed by the rational, scientifically based guidance of experts.

Throughout the postwar era marketing scholars continued to explore store personality in an effort to hone the physical retail space into one ever more conducive to consumption. In the latter 1960s and 1970s analysis of a store's personality evolved into an understanding of the store as environment, or even as an atmosphere. And further, that the physical nature of the store was not separate from the items sold within, but instead was intrinsic to the concept of a "total product." According to marketing scholar Philip Kotler, when considering a tangible product, shoppers

¹¹⁰ "A 10-Point Guide to Successful Retailing: First of a Two-Part Series," 212.

thought of it as part of a larger consumption package that included services, warranties, advertising, images, and, perhaps most importantly, the locale where it is purchased. "One of the most significant features of the total product is the place where it is bought or consumed. In some cases, the place, more specifically, the atmosphere of the place is more influential than the product itself in the purchase decision." Kotler typified the careful and creative composition of the sales environment—lighting, sounds, spatial configurations, displays—as a silent language of "atmospherics."¹¹¹

Essentially, Kotler was theorizing concepts that many forward-looking home improvement retailers had put into practice a decade previous. The postwar remodeling store was already a setting in which the products and the spaces that contained them were integrated into a complete experience, whether in terms of personality or environment, image or atmospherics. These stores prominently wore their own remodeling, carefully crafted for mass appeal, as an emulative model and testament to the promise of renovation.

Remodeling the home and remodeling the store were tied together in an overarching culture that in time emphasized a perpetual call for constant improvement. Trade leaders told retailers engaged in remodeling their stores that such change was

¹¹¹ Kotler defines atmospherics as "the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability." In one example, he describes how some furniture stores (known for being crowded with merchandise) are starting to develop "mock living rooms" that show related furniture in an integrated presentation that helps the customer visualize the purchased total setting, encourages purchasing the entire set, and "helps the customer go through his problem solving more comfortably and confidently." Philip Kotler, "Atmospherics As a Marketing Tool," *Journal of Retailing* 49, no. 4 (1973): 54.

Marketing scholar Benjamin Butcher described atmospherics as "the use of space or buying environments to create specific psychological effects in consumers to improve the purchase probability. Buying environments include such factors as architecture, layout, lighting, color scheme, odor, temperature, location, access, noise, assortment, prices, and special events." "Successful Shopping Centers Will Hold Market Segments with 'Atmospherics,'" *Marketing News* 9, no. 3 (1975): 8.

only the beginning. Leaving old building material and hardware retail forms behind meant accepting the idea that remodeling was a constant, or at least regular, endeavor. The only thing worse than an old cracker barrel store was one that had been remodeled to reflect the latest products and merchandising solutions a few years ago, but that remained unaltered since. Continuing evolution for some dealers meant focusing more on home improvement or kitchen remodeling and dropping lumber or hardware lines entirely (figure-design-kitchens). Small alterations and reconfiguration of the sales floor (aided by open plans and demountable displays) were expected to be frequent—about six times a year. Daily flexibility could be provided by wheeled "roll-away" rack displays that could be set up out on the sidewalk in front of the store when weather permitted. *The American Lumberman* noted that, "No store should be static to the extent that its layout is immobile. On the contrary, if every fixture in a store can be shifted and relocated easily, that store is better qualified to do a well rounded sales job."¹¹²

The expectation to remodel with ever-greater frequency was an increasing drawing point the industry used to get dealers to target home improvement. *American Lumberman* promised its readership, "every home owner is a prospect for some phase of home decoration each year, year in and year out."¹¹³ Like in a supermarket, the emphasis was on "freshness," on "fresh displays," and a "fresh look." Manufacturers, dealers, and consumer magazines like *Changing Times* passed along such expectations to homeowners when they asserted that, "If your kitchen hasn't been rejuvenated in the

¹¹² "The Retail Dealer [history of Lumber Yards]," 100.

¹¹³ "The Home Decorating Package," 99.

last five or six years or at least had its face lifted, its probably showing its age."¹¹⁴ In fact, the literature coming from trade associations and producers in the 1950s pushing retailers to remodel utilized many of the same arguments directed at consumers. Campaigns initiated by manufacturers, trade organizations, and trade journals to convince store owners that they needed to update, to develop a more efficient, clean, store that was easier to maintain and operate, and to fulfill an obligation to their industry and community, were the same arguments used on homeowners. Where old kitchens were derided in advertisements and remodeling promotions as "horse and buggy," traditional retail outlets crowded with merchandise and folksy proprietors, were described derisively as "old fashioned," and "mossbacked" by those eager for change.

Merchandising experts encouraged remodeling retailers to keep up with formal and stylistic change, adopt time and space-saving layouts, and take advantage of technological and psychological insights to make selling more profitable and secure a prosperous future. Just like the couple in Lowe's Never Stop Improving commercial, whose lifelong remodeling habit is rewarded with multiple generations playing in the yard of their still contemporary home, the embrace of ceaseless change guaranteed retailers' longevity and ongoing viability, and relevance (Figure 2.27). Postwar retailers learned to present their regular renovations as a didactic model for their homeowner customers. The regular changing and upgrading of stores was equated with the regular changing and upgrading of the home, which was equated with change

¹¹⁴ "'Let's Remodel the Kitchen' What's Involved, How to Proceed, What It Will Cost," *Changing Times*: 11, no. 12 (1957): 26.

and improvement of one's life. It was a powerful argument that resonated with postwar American consumers (and, the Lowe's campaign suggests, with consumers fifty years later). Those first postwar retailers plying the streamlined aisles and model room displays of their newly remodeled stores could sell the concept of perpetual renewal with conviction as they had already bought it themselves.



Figure 2.1. A still from a Lowe's television commercial accompanying their campaign, "Never Stop Improving," which follows a woman from dating to marriage to motherhood to grandparenthood. With each transition in life, she and her growing family rework their home. In the frame above, the new bride (still in wedding dress) renews her wall treatment.

Source: "Never Stop Improving." Lowe's Companies. (2011).



Figure 2.2. The ceiling of a hardware store in Grundy Center, Iowa, in 1939 shows how the space above was used to store inventory.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs, Division, photographer Carol M. Highsmith, LC-USF34-028211-D.



Figure 2.3. The interior of a store in Olga, Louisiana in 1938. Such retail establishments were as important as social gathering places as they were commercial spaces. They could carry class and gender signals that made certain customers uncomfortable. Such signals were all the more potent when the store carried building materials and catered to tradesmen.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs, Division, photographer Russell Lee, LoC Reproduction Number: USF33-011822-M5



Figure 2.4. Postwar retail diversification saw businesses attempting to poach customers from each other by expanding their inventory into new areas. A variety of store types added home improvement products and materials to their stock.

Source: *Hardware Age*, August 2, 1956.



Figure 2.5. Dealer remodeling appeals increasingly featured a woman as primary customer. Here a female shopper inspects insulation samples at the Heimbach Lumber Company showroom in Duluth Minnesota, 1955.

Source: Conwed Corporation archives, Minnesota Historical Society.



Figure 2.6. The Ace Hardware Store in Minot, South Dakota underwent a modest modernization campaign around 1950. Though the store remained in its original location and the ceilings were left exposed, remodelers arranged the inventory in orderly rows, and cultivated an image of spaciousness and cleanliness.

Source: <http://www.minotmemories.com/2012/02/past-businesses-1960s-8.html>. Accessed, May 14, 2012.



Kawneer Store Fronts Pay Off at the Cash Register

10 to 25% Immediate Volume Increase

Why wait to boost sales when store front modernization alone provides up to 25% increased sales?

Kawneer store fronts dramatically translate appeal into action at the cash registers. They pay for themselves—and quickly—in the extra volume and profits they bring to your store.

Your new store front will advertise for you continuously. Old customers will be anchored to your store. New traffic will grow and become regulars. "Walk-in" trade will sport. Countrywide, owners report 10, 20%, and even more sales increase from

store front renovation alone.

Rich color, exceptional variety in materials and metals, individual attention are all yours from Kawneer. And your custom job comes from the right combination of architectural materials in the complete Kawneer stocks, so prices are low.

Check now on the profit opportunities that a Kawneer Store Front can bring you. Send the coupon for 16-page book, "How to Modernize Your Store Front."

Send this coupon now
for your free copy of the
new Kawneer 16-page book,
"How to Modernize
Your Store Front."



Kawneer Company, Dept. SMN-108 Niles, Michigan

Please send me a copy of your new book, "How to Modernize Your Store Front."

Name

Title

Rank

Address

City Zone State

Figure 2.7. A 1958 advertisement for Kawneer Company promised store owners a 10-25 percent increase in traffic following a storefront modernization campaign.

Source: "Blueprint for Supermarket Success." *Supermarket News* (1958): 42.



Figure 2.8. Heimbach Lumber Company in Duluth Minnesota replaced the old entrance and office in the 1950s with a new showroom featuring prominent entrance, signage and display windows.

Source: Conwed Corporation archives, Minnesota Historical Society.



Figure 2.9. Charles Pokorny's New Buffalo, Michigan showroom illustrates how new home improvement retail centers could be virtually indistinguishable from other modernist buildings, whether commercial or residential.

Source: "Highway Showroom Builds Sale Traffic." *Domestic Engineering* (June 1952): 123.



Figure 2.10. Rows of paint cans and other home improvement products line the walls of a postwar building supply store. The resemblance to supermarket display layouts was not unintentional, as remodeling retailer sought to translate the selling success of large-scale grocery stores to their field.

Source: "How Much Paint Can I Sell?" *Hardware Age* (3 March 1955): 121.

GRAND OPENING

E. E. HUBBARD AND SON

NEW SHOW ROOM
AT
108 E. Livingston
OH

Saturday, December 1, 1951
at 9 a. m. to 9 p. m.

Featuring an outstanding display of fixtures
by
AMERICAN-Standard
... First in plumbing ...

Selecting plumbing fixtures for your home may be one of the most important decisions of your life. You'll want them to be distinctive. To lend charm and color. To add the note of efficiency your family and guests require and admire. But above all you'll want quality. That's why your selection of American-Standard Plumbing Fixtures is bound to be a better investment. We sell the complete line of American-Standard plumbing fixtures designed for better living in your home.

**Door
Prize**

Free
DOUGHNUTS
and
COFFEE

E. E. HUBBARD & SON

Monticello, Ill.

Phone 278

Figure 2.11. The inauguration of E. E. Hubbard's new showroom in Monticello, Illinois was celebrated with a grand opening that reinforced the idea of transformation and the benefits of progress.

Source: "A New Leader Is Born." *Domestic Engineering* (March 1952), 129.



Figure 2.12. Knotty pine walls, decked out with framed pictures, sugar and flour containers and clocks, gave the remodeling showroom a disarmingly domestic flavor.

Source: "A New Store Is No Ticket to the Gravy Train." *American Lumberman* (October 9, 1948): 79.



Figure 2.13. A hardware and remodeling retailer in Vassar, Michigan shown at the time of its grand opening, ca. 1950. Knotty pine walls and signage resembling high school and college pennants gives the showroom the appearance of a newly-finished basement recreation room or teenager's bedroom.

Source: <http://www.swanson-media.com/photos/lightboxes/vassar/work/source/rs481.html>. Accessed on March 29, 2012.



Figure 2.14. The Wm. Cameron & Co. store in Waco, Texas, featured a lounge (left) and a consultation and display room (right) that encouraged customers to take their time browsing catalogs and product samples in a homey, informal atmosphere.

Source: "Specialist in Home Styling." *American Lumberman* (January 15, 1949), 53.



Figure 2.15. The National Paint, Varnish and Lacquer Association called on its member retailers to install “Color Bars” in their stores, where customers could peruse options and combinations in a relaxed and informal atmosphere.

Source: *Hidden Power: Sales Training Program for Dealers and Dealers’ Clerks: Tips on In-Store Selling*. (Washington, D.C.: National Paint, Varnish and Lacquer Association, October, 1958), chapter 7, page 12.



Figure 2.16. The Toledo, Ohio based Hixon-Peterson Lumber Company featured a sliding door display in their showroom that enabled customers to see the variety of doors offered by the firm as they would appear installed on a home's front facade. It combined the practical benefits of the model in visualizing a completed installation with the thrill of a push button nearly-instantaneous transformation.

Source: "How Hixon's Is Establishing a Reputation As Headquarters for Home Building." *American Lumberman* (October 21, 1950): 40-42.

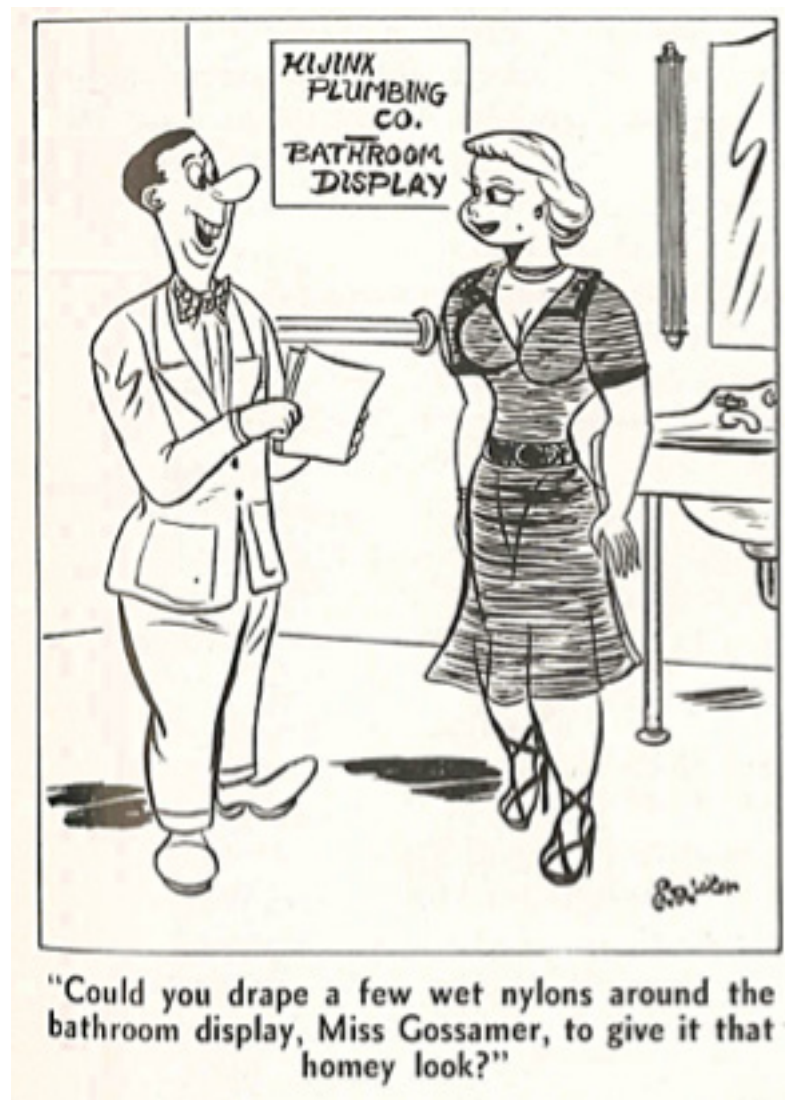


Figure 2.17. Retailers strived to make their display models as realistic as possible enable customers to imagine living with the new improvements. Verisimilitude breed comfort, enabling the customer to forget they were being sold, and, like before-and-after images, skipping over the messy details of cost and installation.

Source: *Domestic Engineering*, November 1955, 227.



Figure 2.18. The working model kitchen installed at Rickbeil Hardware-Appliance-Furniture store in Worthington, Minnesota. A lower ceiling grid further separates the space from the rest of the showroom providing an intimate nook where the illusion of domesticity can further comfort...and sales.

Source: "Invitations Promote Big Ticket Volume." *Hardware Age* (12 May 1955): 156.

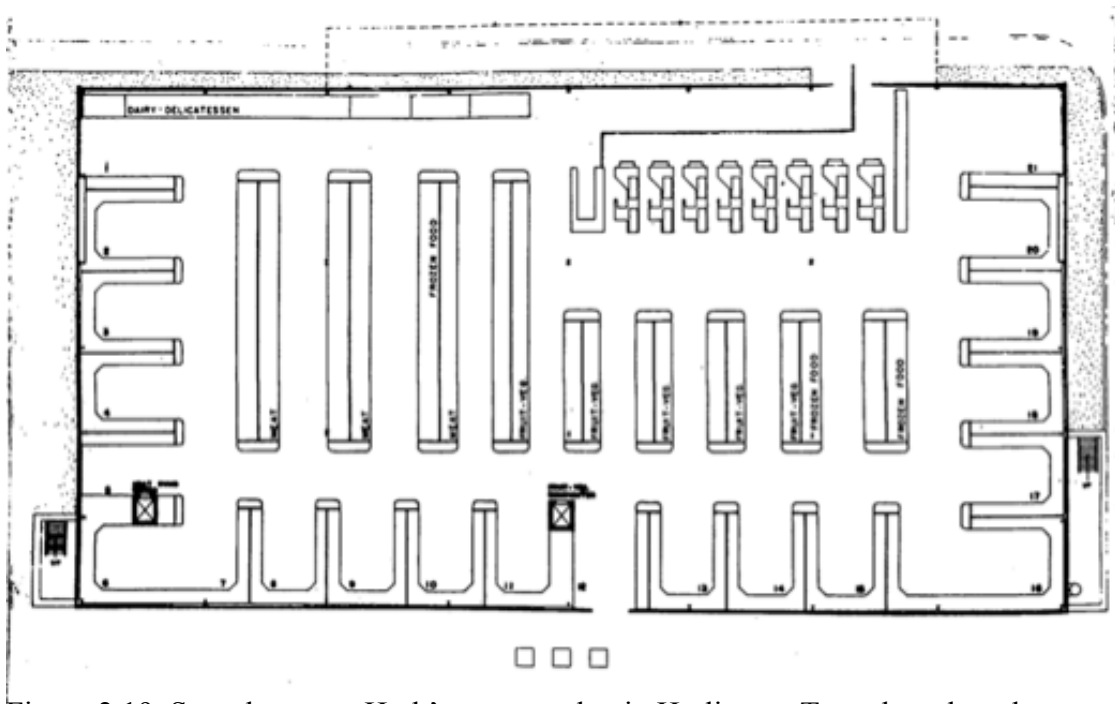


Figure 2.19. Store layout at Herb's supermarket in Harlingen, Texas based on the "alcove merchandising" ideas introduced by Jacob Shore at Shore's in Providence, Rhode Island. Such a layout bore resemblance to the layouts of remodeling stores that featured model set ups in bays along the walls. In both store types the bays allowed customers to see the entire store from the entrance (bays could go to the ceiling and not obstruct the view) and isolate one section from the next and from the store as a whole.

Source: "Grocery Bays: A Novel Layout Dimension." *Super Market Merchandising* (June 1957): 78.



Figure 2.20. A two-page magazine spread showing two of the seven model that made up the in-store Kitchens of To-morrow showroom at Saber's Hardware in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Source: "Annex Display Features Kitchen Planning Service." *Hardware Age* (April 14, 1955): 148-149.



Figure 2.21. Dealer and customer in an informal performance of neighborly information sharing and gentle persuasion. Contractor John F. Kuntz of Lehigh Plumbing and Heating demonstrates a range in his newly enlarged showroom.

Source: "The Bigger They Come...the Better They Sell." *Domestic Engineering* (December 1955): 96.



Figure 2.22. The rotating platform used in the showroom of Villyard Plumbing and Heating Co. in Childress, Texas, featured four distinct bathroom arrangements in a display that drew attention.

Source: "Idea File: Eye-Catching Display Catches the Customers." *Domestic Engineering* (May 1955): 23



Figure 2.23. The “live” faucets on display at the retailer Jimmy West’s showroom in Los Angeles were “potent sales getters.”

Source: “He Has a Store Full of Ideas.” *Domestic Engineering* (August 1950): 90.



Figure 2.24. Salesman demonstrates for a prospect the Youngstown Kitchens Jet-Tower dishwasher. A glass porthole on the washer's lid showed off its inner-workings and "Hydro-Brush Action."

Source: Advertisement. "During National Home Week, Feature the New Youngstown Kitchens Dishwasher..." *American Lumberman*. (August 12, 1950): 18.



Figure 2.25. Robert Adams' store in Philadelphia promoted the sale of baseboard heating systems by locating operating units in high traffic areas so customers would feel and notice the warm air on their ankles. Also note the extensive use of knotty pine wall paneling and other domestic accoutrements.

Source: Adams, John. "Now That You Have a New Store or Are Planning to Build One...Here's How to Keep It Selling." *Domestic Engineering* (December 1951): 85.



Figure 2.26. By the 1970s retailers who focused specifically on one room or material appeared. This kitchen design center in Dubuque, Iowa, typified the new retail form.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs, Division, Reproduction Number: HABS IOWA,31-DUBU,13-R--1.



Figure 2.27. Another still from Lowe's "Never Stop Improving," television commercial. The young couple that begins the Lowe's commercial ends it as grandparents. Their lifelong series of remodeling projects has earned them golden years surrounded by children and grandchildren and a still well-maintained, contemporary-looking home.

Source: "Never Stop Improving." Lowe's Companies. (2011).

CHAPTER 3

“A KITCHEN FOR HER”: THE PERSONALIZED POSTWAR KITCHEN

“Pretty Housewives and Sparkling Kitchens Belong Together.”
– *Domestic Engineering*, 1954.¹

Postwar remodeling promoters asserted that kitchen designs should reflect the body and personality of the woman who used it most. This argument rendered millions of current kitchens out of date and in need of immediate improvement. By cultivating a sense of dissatisfaction with existing kitchens as impersonal and by normalizing the assumption that kitchens embody individualism, the home improvement industry established foundations for limitless future work. The regularly remodeled kitchen would be a place of pride for the homemaker, an articulation of who she was and how her family lived. Beautiful and efficient, its bright colors, functional layout, and up-to-date equipment would “reduce to pleasant moments tasks which used to take back-breaking hours.”²

Historically kitchen remodeling, like kitchen construction, was done on an entirely ad hoc basis. Nineteenth century home reformers and domestic advisors such as Catharine Beecher did encourage housewives to introduce time and labor saving arrangements to their kitchens.³ But it was only with twentieth century cultural and

¹ "The Dynamic Market for Kitchens: Where Are Your Customers?" *Domestic Engineering* (October 1954): 150.

² Ibid.

³ In her 1841 book (revised in 1843) Beecher argued that housewives should invest in a well-organized kitchen before showy parlor furnishings. “A full supply of all conveniences in the kitchen and cellar,

economic changes—increasing scarcity of domestic servants, widespread adoption of electricity and electrical appliances, the growth of factory-made kitchen pantry and cabinet units—that a consumer market for kitchen remodeling emerged.⁴ Appliance manufacturers, electric companies, and building material companies established departments in the 1920s and 30s that advocated kitchen updating to stimulate consumption of their products.⁵ The emphasis was on creating kitchens as efficient, hygienic workspaces.⁶ Modest home repair and improvement projects fit the make-do austerity of the Depression and World War II years when there were few resources available for new construction.

With a general economic expansion, growing home ownership, pent up consumer demand, and a building industry looking toward consumers, the kitchen remodeling market took off. A 1951 survey reported that eight women in ten with

and a place appointed for each article, very much facilitates domestic labor. For want of this, much vexation and loss of time is occasioned, while seeking vessels in use, or in cleaning those employed by different persons, for various purposes. It would be far better, for a lady to give up some expensive article, in the parlor, and apply the money, thus saved, for kitchen conveniences, than to have a stinted supply, where the most labor is to be performed.” Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (Boston: Thomas H. Webb & Co., 1843), 163.

⁴ Introduced in 1899, the Hoosier Manufacturing Company's Hoosier Kitchen consolidated into a single prefabricated unit, a work table, drawers, and cabinets for storing bulk foods and tools. For a thorough discussion of the beginnings of modular kitchen units, see: Mary Ann Beecher, "Promoting the "Unit Idea": Manufactured Kitchen Cabinets (1900-1950)," *Association for Preservation Technology Bulletin* 32 (2001): 27-37.

⁵ *Planning the Kitchen Electrically: Electric Home Planning Series, Manual No. 1* (Pittsburgh: Better Homes Department, Westinghouse Electric Corporation, 1946), 1. Westinghouse had a "Home Economics Department," "Home Building Department," and "Better Homes Department" issuing brochures, hosting exhibits at home shows, and working with the design and production departments to develop new products.

⁶ Hygiene and sanitation had been a focus of domestic advisors since the nineteenth century, but they took on new importance with growing scientific knowledge in the early twentieth. Housewives were expected to remain informed of this knowledge. Mary Pattison wrote in 1915 that, “The very health and body of the family depends to a large degree upon the . . . intelligent practice of sanitation and hygiene, the comprehension of bacteriology.” Quoted in: Margaret Horsfield, *Biting the Dust: The Joys of Housework* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 100.

kitchens more than four years old wanted to make major changes to the room.⁷

Kitchen designs promulgated by manufacturers, retailers, mass-market magazines, and postwar domestic advisors were moving away from past forms.⁸ The compact, single-purpose workspaces espoused by interwar domestic engineers such as Lillian Galbreth, and taken to new functionalist ends in European socialist experiments such as Margarete Schütte-Lihotsky's Frankfurt kitchen, were deemed too cold, too isolating, and most importantly, too anonymous for the postwar American housewife.⁹ What Elizabeth Collins Cromley calls the "food axis" of preparation and consumption spaces came together again in the 1950s. Dining and cooking were performed in the same room, but increasingly so were socializing, homework, and relaxing.¹⁰ Books

⁷ Edward R. Taylor, "New Builder Profits From Kitchen Modernization," *American Builder* 73-74 (July 1, 1951): 114.

⁸ These shifts were just the latest in a long history of kitchens as malleable spaces both in terms of their physical configuration and the meanings they were supposed to convey. See, Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), which discusses the history of shared and cooperative alternatives to the private domestic kitchen. Among recent writings on American kitchen design and meaning, see Cromley's *Food Axis*, and the catalog for *Counter Space*, a 2010-11 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City that explored the influence of politics, gender, food attitudes and consumerism on twentieth century kitchens. The section entitled "Kitchens of Plenty" examined postwar kitchenscapes shaped by consumerism, a reassertion of traditional gender ideologies, and the Cold War. Juliet Kinchin and Aidan O'Connor, *Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011). For a study of how kitchen design worked in large-scale postwar residential developments, namely the Levittowns in New York and Pennsylvania, see: Curtis Miner, "Pink Kitchens for Little Boxes: The Evolution of 1950s Kitchen Design in Levittown," in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*, ed. Dianne Harris (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

⁹ For a comparative analysis of European and American kitchens and their ideological role in the Cold War, see: Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009). For insights into the influence of American scientific management on interwar Modernist housing in Europe, see: Nicholas Bullock, "First the Kitchen—Then the Façade," *Journal of Design History* 1, no. 3-4 (1988): 177-192.

¹⁰ Shifts in cultural attitudes and homeowner status had historically affected the domestic food axis' configuration. For example, as early nineteenth century American families became more affluent, they moved service spaces further from the refined parlor and dining room - spaces meant for entertaining and showing off. Food preparation was relocated to kitchen ells and outbuildings. Elizabeth Collins Cromley, *The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating and the Architecture of American Houses* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010). Cromley's interest in the evolutionary, occupant-altered nature of the built environment is also demonstrated in earlier works such as Elizabeth Collins Cromley,

and magazines articles illustrated how postwar remodelers were removing partitions to make kitchen-dining-living rooms, installing continuous cabinets and counters, and replacing old pantries, porches, and steps with breakfast bars, snack booths, and kitchen-laundries. At the same time, a laboratory-like reserve gave way to bright hues and patterns, informality, and even themed decorative schemes. The kitchen went from a place hidden from view, where labor and laborer were concealed, to a personalized showplace "around which all household activities revolve."¹¹ In 1949 *American Builder* stated, "The severe 'operating room' look in kitchens is no longer popular; women prefer a colorful, homelike room, expressive of their taste and individuality."¹²

A variety of companies and actors entered the market. Homeowners looking to remodel their kitchens could hire a local architect to design a completely original layout and a local contractor to build and install it. Alternately, a growing number of lumber and hardware firms also offered design and construction services, touting the expertise of their in-house "kitchen specialists."¹³ Many retailers also offered a third,

"Modernizing: Or, 'You Never See a Screen Door on Affluent Homes,'" *Journal of American Culture* 5, no. 2 (1982): 71-79.

¹¹ R. J. Alexander, "Built-in Features for the Kitchen," *American Builder* 71, no. 4 (1949): 162. Two years later, the magazine reinforced the point stating that, "The trend is definitely toward the early American idea of the kitchen serving as the living and working center of the home." Taylor, "New Builder Profits From Kitchen Modernization", 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 162.

¹³ Stores and dealers were focused primarily on selling merchandise—the cabinets, appliances, countertops and flooring. Designers and contractors were primarily focused on selling their expertise and labor, configuring and installing new kitchens. However, there was always overlap, efforts by one field to poach the services of others, and offers to provide complete packages. When architects were engaged, they would often go to building material and appliance sellers, spec out the necessary supplies and often provide the client with a number of recommendations and choices.

A 1949 article in *American Builder* described a typical alternative to wholly custom kitchens and prefabricated steel kitchens. Showcasing the work of the Edward Hines Lumber Company in Chicago, the article identified the importance of custom work to solve any storage need and "introduce originality

more economical, alternative, the purchase of mass-produced, prefabricated wood and steel kitchen cabinets.

Steel kitchen cabinets first appeared during the interwar period as steel manufacturers expanded from office and medical furnishings into the residential market. The industry grew rapidly after the war, peaking in 1955 with \$209 million in sales.¹⁴ Appliance, furniture and department stores, and plumbing, hardware and lumber dealers accounted for the majority of steel kitchen remodeling sales. Like the prefabricated wood cabinet "suites" that preceded them, steel kitchens were modular. Consumers were to mix and match base and wall cabinets, sinks, cupboards, and closets to create what manufacturers called an endless variety of configurations. In this way, virtually identical cabinets, produced by the millions, could be offered up as part of a couture kitchen. Manufacturers considered modular assembly a way to integrate factory efficiencies into the American residential building market while addressing concerns that these same efficiencies would strip homes (and their occupants) of their distinctive character. Efforts to reconcile mass-produced goods with the consumer's desire for individuation date back to the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Gwendolyn Wright has

into the plan." A typical project taken on by the company's planning department called for substantial structural changes in the existing kitchen. "These involved knocking out one wall to unify the dinette and kitchen, recessing another to obtain space for a new refrigerator, installing a picture window, and changing the plumbing." "Dealer Kitchen Planning Department Aids Contractor," *American Builder* 71, no. 11 (November 1, 1949): 95.

¹⁴ "Steel Kitchens at '56 Pace," *Steel* 140 (May 20, 1957): 98. In the following years sales declined precipitously as consumers showed a growing preference for wood cabinets, the cost of steel rose relative to wood and a new home construction experienced a general slowdown. In 1957 there were ten firms producing 85 percent of the steel cabinets, and ten smaller manufacturers supplying the remainder. See also: "Cabinet Sales Slide," *Steel* (June 9, 1958): 61.

¹⁵ However, according to some scholars, "mass customization" did not reach maturity until the 1990s when new forms of automation, production, and delivery enabled efficient "mass production of individually customized goods and services." B. Joseph Pine and Stan Davis, *Mass Customization: The New Frontier in Business Competition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 48.

described how by the 1870s, industrialization made available inexpensive wood ornament and trim that builders and homeowners used to make otherwise non-descript homes appear unique.¹⁶ By balancing high-volume production of a set number of modular components, post-World War II prefabricated kitchen manufacturers sought to offer low-cost installations with enough options to create a sense of individuality.

To understand how building product manufacturers and retailers used personalization as a central rhetorical tool to encourage postwar homeowners to upgrade their kitchens, the chapter first considers kitchen reconfiguration from a gendered perspective. The postwar kitchen was a center of female domesticity where the housewife enacted family nurturing and care through its up-to-date arrangement and use. Remodeling promoters acknowledged husbands as heads of the household, but marginalized their place in the kitchen. Manufacturers, dealers, and advertisers instilled and fomented dissatisfaction in existing kitchens and used this dissatisfaction

Industries turned to mass customization at this time because the American consumer market was less homogeneous, less equal in terms of income distribution, and growing slower than in the mid-century peak decades of mass production. Pine has argued that “The best method for achieving mass customization...is by creating modular components that can be configured into a wide variety of end products and services.” William Mitchell and Ryan Chin, “Before Pine and Dell: Mass Customization in Urban Design, Architecture, Linguistics, and Food,” in *Handbook of Research in Mass Customization and Personalization: Strategies and Concepts*, ed. Frank T. Piller and Mitchell M. Tseng (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2010), 139. The authors reference William Mitchell’s 1977 book *The Logic of Architecture*, in which he explores how architects, historically and in contemporary practice, used the combination of component parts as a generative system. Ibid., 143.

¹⁶ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press (paperback), 1983), 102. For a related discussion of pattern books, national unity, and builder inventiveness, see: Ibid., 87. Suggesting an even earlier provenance of this trend, Catharine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe were critical of architects’ tendency to include such exterior embellishments. Using the term invented by another who “had dubbed them curlywurlies” and “whigmaliries,” the sisters wrote that these expensive details “make the house neither prettier nor more comfortable.” Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. *The American Woman's Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science*. New York: J.B. Ford & Co., 1869), 84. Gwendolyn Wright argued that mass production later significantly lowered the cost of such individualization. In the 1870s, according to Wright, “A façade of different materials, abundant detailing, and many colors was not necessarily an expensive undertaking.” Ibid., 101.

to justify replacing old kitchens with new versions. They gave shape to improvement desires through the rhetoric of the “dream kitchen,” a setting of fantasy made real. The final section explores how advertisements, promotional campaigns, and professional advice framed the need for kitchen personalization. For comfort and ease, to reduce strain and fatigue. Fitting the wife’s body and functioning as a physical an expression (and container) of her individual tastes and habits, the remodeled kitchen ensured health and happiness. The chapter argues that home improvement appeals skillfully combined homeowner aspirations (conditioned through interwar and wartime “Kitchens of Tomorrow”) and the increasing cultural desire for rapid gratification (“available today”) to prompt consumer investment. It claims that promoters added to the existing concept of personalization a potent postwar cultural interest in possessions that comported with and conveyed their owner’s self image.

The Gender of Kitchen Remodeling

Any study of postwar kitchen remodeling is correspondingly a study of postwar gender issues. Culture, tradition, chauvinism, and economic circumstance assigned the role of cooking and homemaking almost exclusively to women.¹⁷ The American woman was expected to assume charge of organizing and operating domestic kitchen spaces as part of her overall responsibility of furthering the mental and physical wellbeing of her family. Sanitary campaigns beginning at the end of the nineteenth

¹⁷ Kitchen work was an assumed part of the marriage contract, a religious obligation. One motivational researcher claimed, cooking "was the providence of women for so long a time that it came to seem sex-linked and even a silent covenant in the pledge to love, honour and obey." It was, thus, a "double burden of propriety and divinely-ordained duty." Colin C. Kempner, "Revolution in the Kitchen or Women Have Given Up Cooking and Don't Even Know It," unpublished manuscript, (Croton-on-Hudson, NY: Institute for Motivational Research, Inc., n.d.).

century and in the first decades of the twentieth century promoted continual reconsideration and reconfiguration of the kitchen. Updated kitchens featuring electrical appliances and stain-resistant materials such as glazed ceramic tile and porcelain enamel took on the appearance of hospital rooms.

Mass-market magazines, the domestic advisors they often published, home economic schools, and social clubs were primary promulgators of advice on improving the kitchen. Popular periodicals like *Good Housekeeping* and *House Beautiful* along with more focused journals such as *American Kitchen Magazine* were dedicated specifically to creating the salubrious and appealing home. Embedded in the innumerable articles on kitchen trends and upgrades is the assumption that women had primary responsibility for shaping the space a center of domestic life.¹⁸ Beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century, college and secondary school home economic programs worked to establish domestic science as a legitimate field of study.¹⁹ Academic programs undertook empirical research and applied the principles of scientific management espoused by efficiency experts like Frederick Taylor to household organization. Goals included reducing domestic labor through rationalization and the adoption of new technologies, developing the housewife as an educated and critical consumer, and bestowing on her and her work greater respect

¹⁸ For a survey of domestic advisors, see: Sarah Abigail Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For a study of interwar mass-market magazines and advertising, see: Chapter 4: Mr. Advertiser Meets Mrs. Consumer, in: Regina Lee Blaszczyk, "Introduction: Shopping for the Perfect Self," in *American Consumer Society: 1865-2005: From Hearth to HDTV* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 2009), 116-136. Nancy Walker examines the roles and responsibilities of the postwar housewife articulated through mass-market magazines in her introduction to: *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998).

¹⁹ A concise history of the home economics movement is provided in: Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, 159.

and authority.

Domestic engineering sought to exploit new technologies, materials, and equipment to reduce the burden of keeping house. Experts called on housewives to stay up to date on the latest products designed to make their lives easier. The development of laborsaving processes were pointless, some said, if undertaken in outdated kitchens. Physical changes to existing kitchens were essential to reshaping habits and attitudes. Georgia Child, author of the influential 1914 book, *The Efficient Kitchen*, wrote, "Do not try to do efficient work in an inefficient house. First, transform your conditions."²⁰ Thus consumption was integral to the kitchen modernization project. In the 1920s, Christine Frederick acknowledged as much, embracing planned obsolescence and recasting the housewife as Mrs. Consumer.²¹ Yet from its inception the field of home economics from which domestic engineering emerged, was premised on the notion of thrift and the careful budgeting of household expenditures. Women were urged to live within their means and make do with the resources at hand, a message especially resonant during the Great Depression and

²⁰ Child took up the study of domestic science when with a growing family and difficulty finding servants, became overwhelmingly frustrated with labor-intensive kitchen work. The quote is from her mentor, Charles Bernard, who established the Housekeeping Experiment Station in Darien, Connecticut, to explore household efficiencies. Georgie Boynton Child, *The Efficient Kitchen: Definite Directions for the Planning, Arranging and Equipping of the Modern Labor-Saving Kitchen—A Practical Book for the Home-Maker* (New York: McBride, Nast & Company, 1914), x. For information on Bernard's project see: "An Experiment Station for Making Housekeeping Easy," *New York Times*, May 7, 1911, SM13.

²¹ For an overview of Frederick, see: Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick & the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2003). For a study of domesticity and consumption in the first third of the twentieth century, see: Roger Miller, "Selling Mrs. Consumer: Advertising and the Creation of Suburban Socio-Spatial Relations, 1910–1930," *Antipode* 23, no. 3 (1991): 263–301.

World War II.²²

In addition to being gendered as feminine spaces through occupation and obligation, kitchens were feminized through their physical ordering. Taking cues from a gendered reading of the human body, designers imbued kitchen equipment with a feminized character. If masculine forms were typically defined as robust, bulky, muscular, and angular, feminine design features were voluptuous, curvaceous, and delicate. Beginning in the 1920s and 30s, industrial designers, aware that women were increasingly in charge of purchasing decisions, feminized mass-produced consumer goods from pencil sharpeners to telephones. In the immediate postwar era steel kitchen manufacturers likewise rounded corners and softened the overall appearance of their products. Touting their modern appliances and finishes as models of efficiency and, manufacturers concurrently depicted these products in inviting, "homey" settings that stabilized them in established, traditional understandings of the feminine kitchen (Figure 3.1). The effect was to deindustrialize (emasculate them) and domesticate them (feminize them).²³ According to Penny Sparke, women's taste triumphed in the 1950s and became a prevalent consumer design aesthetic. Throughout the period, designers, manufacturers, dealers, salesmen, and advertisers continually sought to pinpoint this aesthetic, and identify what pitches, promotions and products would most

²² With the coming of postwar prosperity these latter concerns diminished only to rise again in the 1970s with increased consumer protection concerns, a declining economy, and the rise of environmental awareness.

²³ Marketing efforts on behalf of Carl Strandlund's Lustron steel homes and even to some extent Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House were also examples of how designers domesticated industrial objects and materials. In promotional materials, Lustron homes were decorated with conventional furnishings, and the steel walls touted as advantageous because paintings and family portraits could be secured using only magnets. Despite its spaceship exterior, promotional pieces depicted the Dymaxion House furnished in a contemporary, though not futuristic, manner.

likely resonate with their female audience.²⁴ While postwar remodeling boosters began to target women consumers, the promotional literature clearly shows that they had a hard time fully accepting women as final decision-makers. Was the woman who spent the most time in the kitchen and was in charge of family purchases the one who had the predominant say in whether and in what way a space would be upgraded? Or was it the man, as breadwinner and arbiter of big purchases, who made the decision? Gender problematized remodeling promotion as manufacturers, dealers, and their advertising agencies attempted to navigate a shifting consumer landscape where females exercised growing authority and the husband's role was ambiguous.

The influence and importance of the woman/housewife in kitchen remodeling consumption was undeniable. In 1954 *Domestic Engineering* claimed that women made up 75 percent of purchases for the home in the US.²⁵ A 1965 newspaper repeated a national magazine survey's claims that four out of five remodeling jobs were suggested by women. The article further asserted, "the wife is the main influence of 95 per cent of kitchen remodeling jobs and in 85 per cent of the redecorating projects."²⁶ Around the same time, the trade journal *American Lumberman* noted that, "Mrs. Homeowner says the word that determines the purchase of practically every accessory and fixture in the home...it's her hand that directs what is applied or

²⁴ That the postwar kitchen was a demonstrably feminine space is not to argue that both women and kitchens can only be considered through the binaries noted above (masculine/feminine, public/private, production/consumption). The notion of "separate spheres," in which the female's place in culture is identified in terms of opposition to the male's place, e.g. the feminine is not public, not engaged with the wider world beyond the home, and not involved in production, was foundational to gender studies. However, recent scholarship has moved beyond this binary seeing it as reductive, and in some way perpetuating a characterization of isolation and exclusion. My primary objective is to explore how gender attitudes in relation to the kitchen were articulated and encoded in the rhetoric of remodeling.

²⁵ "Attract the Feminine Trade, Says Lacey," *Domestic Engineering* (February 1954): 159.

²⁶ "Woman Suggests Four Out of 5 Remodeling Jobs," *Chicago Daily Defender* (1965): 16.

installed in her home, and when it is applied.”²⁷

Recognizing the woman’s role, remodeling companies willingly addressed what they saw as the female home improvement consumer’s unique concerns and shopping habits. While women were occasionally credited as being practical, no-nonsense shoppers who could tell a gimmick from a truly helpful innovation, traditional stereotypes retained their hold on male promoters and their rhetoric. Trade magazines featured salesmen commiserating with each other about temperamental and indecisive women customers. Alternately, they claimed women were easily persuaded by what the male dealer and salesmen saw as superficial characteristics of a product, drawn in by the overall appearance of a remodeled showroom or the bright colors of a new appliance. Illustrating this contradictory characterization, a 1950 *American Lumberman* article observed that women shoppers were mercurial in the preferences but decisive when they were ready for change. “Millions of dollars are constantly spent for home decoration, not because the old decorations are shabby and worn out, but because milady’s ideas and tastes call for a change. And when she decides it is time to buy, her mind is pretty well made up as to what she wants.”²⁸

If the housewife asserted greater authority in decisions regarding kitchen organization and expenditure, promoters still saw her spouse as having a central role in closing sales.²⁹ In part this was due to the expense of kitchen remodeling. Postwar

²⁷ "Selling Home Decorating," *American Lumberman* (September 9, 1950): 120-122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁹ Discussions of how to involve the husband in a remodeling project continued well into the 1970s. In a section titled "Bringing Your Husband into the Act" author Klaus Paradies tutors his female readers on evaluating whether their husband is qualified to take on any of actual construction work of remodeling project. The fact that he is financing it is still assumed: "Under any circumstances you'd welcome your husband's advice and suggestions (after all, who's paying all or a good share of the bill?) but help goes

home improvement literature regularly depicted a husband who took the lead in purchasing heavy appliances and signed off on big-budget remodeling projects. Furthermore, there was often a gendered assignment of male responsibility for interventions into the physical fabric of the home. The husband most often decided questions concerning the reconfiguration of the house (especially structural alterations, the moving of partitions and openings).

Remodeling discussions in the mass media during this period regularly framed kitchen improvements as either gifts bestowed upon the wife by a loving and concerned husband or prizes that housewives had to win through suggestion or plea (Figure 3.2). A 1951 store display for the In-Sink-Erator garbage disposer told customers that "an In-Sink-Erator for your wife takes the garbage out of your life...be an angel Mister."³⁰ In a 1954 commercial embedded in the television program *The Adventures of Ozzy and Harriet*, Harriet Nelson breaks away from the narrative to tout the advantages of her Hotpoint Automatic Laundry. She concludes the pitch stating, "You know, this Hotpoint Automatic Laundry could change your whole life. Why not drop a hint to that husband of yours or better still tell him to go out and buy you one right now."³¹

Salesmen often described husbands as holdouts requiring additional massaging and cajoling to come around to a remodeling project.³² One contractor, E. Herman

beyond advice and suggestions—far beyond. Help means he's got to pitch in actively." Klaus Paradies, *The Kitchen Book: How to Get Exactly the Kitchen You Want* (New York: Peter Wyden, Inc., 1973), 39.

³⁰ "Get this Display Free," Advertisement, *Domestic Engineering* (November 1951): 124.

³¹ "Harriet Nelson in 1950s Commercial for Hotpoint Laundry," YouTube. Accessed 1/11/2012. <http://youtu.be/WjgI9172FRY>

³² This was not a phenomenon new to the postwar era. Rural husbands in the 1930s proved similarly immune to pleas to upgrade farmhouse kitchens. Christine Kleinegger, "Out of the Barns and Into the

Moser described his approach: "On cold-canvass calls our salesmen always try to contact the wife first. They are usually successful in 'selling' her but sometimes they do not make a sale because the husband has to be consulted—and that's right where many a sale bogs down and that's where I come in with my 'closer.'"³³ Moser was the closer. As the 'boss,' he would make an evening call in which he used the change in his pocket as a prop, suggesting that the husband should start saving the money from tips when they dine out, to tip his wife in the form of a new range or other appliance. The housewife cast as domestic wait staff, has an ambivalent role in these transactions. The salesperson sees her both positively, as appreciative of his products' allure, and negatively, as impulsive and lacking the capacity to rationally consider all angles of the purchase (especially financial) as her spouse does. The husband is begrudgingly admired for his logical caution and financial restraint.

Pitches to the housewife emphasized broader values of taste, style, personal expression, personal validation (as improving ability to be good housewife and mother), appropriateness for individual lifestyles and practices. While appeals to men emphasized specifications, technological improvements, economic value, and as we will see later in the chapter, the desire to preserve his wife's body from wear.³⁴ In numerous films and advertising campaigns, the husband acknowledged the plight of his spouse stuck in an inefficient and unattractive kitchen only when he was placed in her shoes, doing work that he normally avoided in a space to which he was unfamiliar.

Kitchens: Transformations in Farm Women's Work in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," in *Women, Work, and Technology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

³³ "Try This Sales Closer on Your Male Prospects," *Domestic Engineering* (January 1952): 130, 132.

³⁴ Sandy Isenstadt, "Visions of Plenty: Refrigerators in America Around 1950," *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 4 (1998): 313

Women's Home Companion magazine, Republic Steel and the Formica Corporation sponsored a film in 1955 entitled *A Word to the Wives* in which the protagonist Jane Peters visits a friend's new home featuring a kitchen equipped with every convenience. By contrast, Jane's dated kitchen is, "strictly the nightmare type." When Jane leaves town to visit her mother, husband George is left with the children and the house duties. Charged with cooking, cleaning up, and laundry himself, George finally realizes what his wife has to deal with and supports a change (Figure 3.3.)³⁵ A trade magazine anecdote told of one dealer who, on his way home from work, saw a man doing dishes through the window. He stopped, knocked on the door and promptly sold an automatic dishwasher. According to the article, husbands were most receptive to purchasing the appliance when the pitch was focused on such tangibles as the washer's mechanical simplicity and ease of service.³⁶

Promotional imagery generally reinforced gendered assumptions that depicted the husband as outsider in the kitchen and housewife alone among counters, stove, and sink. As the kitchen opened to the other family members as a place to spend time, to relax, and to play, advertisements and other promotional material tended to reinforce established gender norms about who did what there. Illustrations from the circa 1955 Youngstown brochure *Your Dream Kitchen for a Song*, for example, presented women as commanders of the kitchen. Husband (and sons), while occasionally shown drying dishes, are depicted at best as out-of-place, at worst, as bumbling and almost dangerously incompetent. The housewife looks on with exasperation as her spouse

³⁵ In this case, the Peter family decides to move into a new house.

³⁶ "Greatest Emancipator Since 19th Amendment," *Domestic Engineering* (January 1952): 128.

steal tastes of food, breaks dishes, and fumbles through baby's bath time. Her sons are little better, playing catch with porcelain ware and pots and pans (Figure 3.4).³⁷

On the surface, such depictions assert a female expertise and domination of the kitchen, but they also provide the husband (and other male family members) an out. Their assistance in the kitchen is a futile, if not hazardous, pretense of overturning established gender norms. The husband, placed in an emasculating position of helping with domestic duties, is rescued through consumption. A new kitchen or work area reduces the strain on his wife but also returns him to his proper place as arbiter of family purchasing, obligated to make the final say about house and kitchen expenditures but beyond the obligation to work there. Ineptitude is an alibi, an excuse for a retreat from the kitchen. While the housewife could make decisions about personalizing the space, about layouts and cabinets and wall colors, in the minds of many remodeling promoters, her husband still had a big say in whether the project went forward, and its extent and expense.

A 1953 exchange of letters in the *Rotarian* magazine highlighted the contentious debate about whether the man of the house had a role vis-à-vis the kitchen beyond giving the okay to remodeling projects. While a majority of the male contributors answered “no,” Mrs. Robert W. English, a housewife and music teacher

³⁷ *Dream Kitchens for a Song* (Youngstown, OH: Youngstown Kitchens, 1956). The brochure is one of the few cases where husband and sons are shown helping out in the kitchen. (When help is proffered in the kitchen the daughter usually does it.) Such depictions can be interpreted as promising an end to the isolation of the wife as sole laborer in the kitchen. But they weren't common and psychologists like Ernest Dichter didn't encourage them. The Austrian-born psychologist criticized advertisements that confused gender roles or that made men and women out as identical co-workers rather than acknowledging what he saw as the libidinous differences between the sexes. Men shown adopting female tasks are emasculated; women who take on male tasks reduce their sexiness. Ernest Dichter, "Put the Libido Back Into Advertising," *Motivations: The monthly newsletter of psychological research for business* (1957): 13-19.

from Winnetka, Illinois, offered a contrary position. “Yes, gentlemen, I do believe that husbands should participate in the work of the home. Every time my husband does help wipe the dishes, we not only have a wonderful visit, but the drudgery of dishwashing disappears. And he, in turn, comes up with some helpful suggestions for improving the work areas in our home.”³⁸ For Mrs. English, her husband’s involvement is more psychologically than physically helpful; it also leads to future remodeling projects that benefit her.

Dissatisfaction and Desire

The housewife frustrated with her existing kitchen was a common, seemingly predominant trope in postwar remodeling promotion. Youngstown Kitchens commiserated, “We know you’re tired of makeshift shelves, squeeze-play cabinets, rickety work surfaces, of geegaws and dull drab fixin’s.”³⁹ There was never enough storage space, the counters were too low or too high, the fridge and oven were too small, the floor was hard to keep clean, and the cabinets and appliances were so poorly arranged that the housewife walked more on an average day than the average postman. The kitchen, closed off from the rest of the house, is dreary and bland.⁴⁰ Ads and

³⁸ Mrs. Robert M. English, “Now—A Last Word,” *The Rotarian* 86, no. 3 (March 1955): 16.

³⁹ Youngstown Kitchens, *How to Get Your Dream Kitchen—and Save* (1949), 14.

⁴⁰ A popular YouTube video features a compilation of contemporary infomercial clips called “As Seen On TV: A Tribute to Doing it Wrong.” The video showcases a rapid-fire litany of broken tools, failing materials, ineffective equipment, and products with a variety of other shortcomings. With The Beatles’ song “Help!” as a soundtrack, the people stuck using these devices scowl, grumble, and sigh. In the full-length (usually 15 or 30 minute) versions of the paid programming from which the clips were extracted, the exasperated users are then granted a reprieve from this world of poor design by the promoted product. The viewer is intended to wonder how we ever put up with those old, malfunctioning, time-wasting products and how soon they can get their hands on the new replacement. Though emphasized to comic excess when edited together, the compilation reveals that the rhetoric of housewife frustration remains potent today.

articles derided existing kitchens for their "horse-and-buggy" style and "old-timer" forms. In some cases the pitch was articulated in generational terms. Youngstown Kitchens published its first advertisement immediately before the US entered World War II, stating "It was a great kitchen in Mother's day but...Daughter demands a YPS [Youngstown Pressed Steel] Kitchen for her home!"⁴¹ Ensuring that homemakers shared these feelings of dissatisfaction was a primary goal of home improvement promoters during the postwar era.

Trade groups like the Steel Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturer's Association initiated media campaigns, "designed to make Mrs. American Housewife more 'kitchen conscious' than ever before."⁴² Frigidaire radio announcements from 1950 put to music concerns about out-of-date kitchens that they hoped would resonate with listeners. In one spot, actress Connie Russell sang about her existing range.

oo, oo, oo, oo, I've got those small oven blues
I want turkey for Sunday or fixings for all
but now I've got the blues because the oven's too small

Fortunately, a male chorus offered a solution in the form of a jingle:

Now dry those tears and don't despair
you'll cure those blues with a Frigidaire

Infomercials themselves are contemporary extensions of the advertising medium's effort to co-opt word-of-mouth and customer testimonials, as discussed in the introduction. They commonly feature "ordinary consumers" who discover the wonders of the new product being sold. These long-form commercials are often designed to appear like a conventional TV program, starring characters with whom the audience can easily identify. One also suspects that in recent years, infomercial producers have recognized the genre's often-lampooned reputation and have purposefully developed programs that demonstrate to the extreme the conventions of the form. The hope being that the infomercial would become a cultural meme, posted, talked about, linked to, and remixed on the web. The video "As Seen on TV" is at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=08xQLGWTSag, accessed October 24, 2011.

⁴¹ William W. Suitt, "Black and White, with Simple Message," *Printers' Ink* 197 (November 28, 1941): 18-20.

⁴² "Cabinet Makers Goal...More Kitchen Sales for You," *Domestic Engineering* (July 1954): 115.

In another ad, Russell had “the unexpected company blues” singing about how her existing refrigerator lacked the necessary space to keep extra food in case her husband's boss dropped in for a visit.⁴³

Scripted pitches and industry training courses called on the salesman-kitchen specialist to elicit information from the housewife about her current kitchen. Through these inquiries, the salesman was supposed to first determine whether a new kitchen was necessary and if so what attributes and features were essential to its design. In trade journals, however, an alternative objective was laid out. A 1955 Republic Steel Kitchens ad, for example, directed salesmen to, "Get her to talk about her kitchen. How old is it? What's wrong with it? Make her dissatisfied with it..."⁴⁴

House Beautiful claimed that when kitchen frustrations became so acute as to threaten the housewife's mental health, only one of two solutions was feasible, psychiatric counseling or a remodeling campaign.⁴⁵ The magazine recommended the latter, noting that the homemaker's discontent was ultimately beneficial, that it could be put to use. Discontent would prompt change and, by observing and understanding her frustrations, the housewife could identify the necessary changes to be incorporated in the new kitchen.⁴⁶ In case she had difficulty listing her kitchen's liabilities,

⁴³ Audio files of the commercials, digitized from original 78 records, are archived on the website: automaticwasher.org, accessed October 24, 2011.

⁴⁴ "How to Make More 'Full 40%' Profits...With Proper Kitchen Planning!" *Hardware Age* (March 31, 1955): 39.

⁴⁵ Loye Y. Zundel, "It Wasn't a Psychiatrist Mother Wanted—It Was a New Kitchen," *House Beautiful* (May 1956): 187-188. References to the housewife's mental state threatened by an outdated kitchen are discussed later in the chapter.

⁴⁶ Nancy Craig, "The Best Kitchens Are Planned by Exasperated Women," *House Beautiful* (May 1956): 180-187.

promoters and designers were ready with checklists. Rhetorical questions, lists, questionnaires, and surveys in magazine articles, ads, and brochures encouraged owners to look anew at their kitchen spaces, revealing both obvious and previously unacknowledged faults. Queries were worded in personal terms, prompting respondents to consider their own work methods to give voice to frustrations that they might not have even been aware. Crane Company, manufacturer of plumbing and heating equipment, asked "Is your present kitchen a 'step-waster'?"⁴⁷ A mid-1950s Youngstown brochure asked "Is your present kitchen making you cuckoo?" The latter instructed housewives to tick boxes next to a series of statements to which they agreed: "My kitchen is drab, dull, and lifeless," and "I seem to walk miles in preparing just one meal. My refrigerator, range, table and cabinets are awkwardly arranged."⁴⁸ The respondent was encouraged to see her current kitchen as ill-suited to the ways in which she and her family use it. It was out-of-step with the times and it didn't reflect her personality.

Kitchen rating activities introduced housewives to contemporary design standards and established criteria for both good and bad kitchen planning. Efficiency, rationality, suitability, and attractiveness (all given equal importance) provided a framework for future design decisions. Of course, parties interested in pushing kitchen redesign promulgated all of these criteria. Tile, flooring, and cabinet manufacturers, plumbing contractors, local appliance dealers, advertisers, magazine editors, and home economic specialists pushed the American homeowner, and housewife in particular, to

⁴⁷ *Planning Ideas for Bathrooms and Kitchens* (Chicago: Crane Company, 1949), 14.

⁴⁸ *Is Your Present Kitchen Making You 'Cuckoo'?* (Warren, Ohio: Youngstown Kitchens, ca. 1955)

see their current homes with new eyes primed to deprecate the old.

Quizzes and questionnaires, whether formal surveys meant to be completed, returned, and analyzed, or rhetorical checklists meant for personal contemplation, were important tools in engendering desire as well as disenchantment. Scholar Laura Scott Holliday examined the 1943-44 "Kitchen of Tomorrow" contest, in which *McCall's* magazine asked housewives to select between a conventional and a modern design for their future kitchen. Holliday argues that though purportedly intended to suppress wartime demand for kitchen improvements, the effect of having housewives complete thought-provoking essays and lengthy surveys was the opposite. "Asking women to state the precise contours of their desires also contributed to a project of producing women as consumers."⁴⁹ By encouraging women to imagine a new kitchen with specific products and configurations, the magazine acculturated them as consumers and guided them toward an interest in new features and options. Skipping a discussion of whether a new kitchen was needed and moving directly to the character of the new kitchen was also common in other modes of remodeling promotion. Product samples, before-and-after imagery, full-size model installations, and miniature planning kits had a similar effect, directing potential customers toward discussions of arrangements, features, and finishes. The remodeled kitchen became a logical and unquestioned assumption.

Promoters seeking to establish or augment kitchen dissatisfaction offered a shiny new alternative. In an instant, the existing kitchen was rendered functionally or

⁴⁹ Laura Scott Holliday, "Kitchen Technologies: Promises and Alibis, 1944-1966," *Camera Obscura* 47 16, no. 2 (2001): 96. Surveys of this kind also garnered valuable demographic and consumer preference data that magazines then packaged and marketed to advertisers and manufacturers.

stylistically passé. Salesmen, dealers and manufacturers considered pitches that instilled the perception of obsolescence especially effective when directed toward the kitchen. There, where equipment and surfaces took center stage, new product features like push-button operation and stain-proof finishes constantly emphasized the new and made the existing look inadequate. Consumers perceived obsolescence through an absence of contemporary features (my kitchen doesn't have a breakfast bar or storage space for a week's worth of groceries) as well as appearance (my kitchen doesn't look as good as those in the magazines). Lifestyle changes also pushed evaluations of current kitchens as dated. The whole family was spending more leisure time in the kitchen and designers and homeowners were increasingly calling for more informal, living-room-like arrangements. By 1957, the magazine *Changing Times* considered kitchen obsolescence within a very short time frame. "If your kitchen hasn't been rejuvenated in the last five or six years, or at least had its face lifted, it's probably showing its age."⁵⁰

Appliance manufacturers led the push for perceived obsolescence in the kitchen. In 1957, Hotpoint claimed that in the previous decade, the obsolescence period for refrigerators had been reduced from 15 to 11 years, and was expected to drop to 7 years in the coming decade. The company's surveys found that more than 75% of consumers replaced their refrigerator before it was necessary. Much of this was due to the promotion of new features, among them built-in appliances integrated with cabinets and expanded color palettes. *Modern Metals* remarked, "Hotpoint

⁵⁰ "Let's Remodel the Kitchen' What's Involved, How to Proceed, What It Will Cost," *Changing Times: The Kiplinger Magazine* 11, no. 12 (December 1957): 26.

believes that color is creating obsolescence at a faster rate than any other feature the industry has pushed."⁵¹ Kitchen remodelers paid close attention to such developments as new appliance purchases were a prime opportunity to "sell-up" larger improvement projects.

Stimulating regular replacement of even relatively new products was a practice also seen in other areas of postwar consumer economy. Ever-shorter replacement cycles were especially common in the fashion and automobile industries. Car and clothes manufacturers had learned how to incite demand by arousing in the consumer thoughts that their possessions were no longer contemporary. Through frequent (annual) changes in color, features (the size of tail fins, the length of skirts), and accessories, they kept trend-conscious buyers in a state of perpetual discontent.⁵² Home improvement promoters looked to these industries with admiration and envy, and sought to introduce similar expectations for the home and the bathroom kitchen in particular. One newspaper ad inquired, "Is your kitchen as modern as your car? In which do you spend the most time?"⁵³ Kitchens were equated to one's personal

⁵¹ "To Sell More Refrigerators...Hotpoint's Hot on Aluminum," *Modern Metals* (May 1957): 64. See also: "Hues Help Hotpoint-But," *Steel* 140 (April 1, 1957): 53-54, which stated, "The industry has long sought a way to stimulate consumers to purchase newer, more modern appliances before the old ones wore out-average life is better than ten years. Color may increase this obsolescence factor. What's more, after the homemaker buys a colored refrigerator, she will often purchase additional colored appliances." Consumers' Research Bulletin noted that an increasing number of manufacturers looked favorably on the development of built-in appliances, seeing them as "one of the greatest developments of the century in providing the appliance industry with something new to sell, and something to make current appliances look out of date." "Built-in Kitchens," *Consumers' Research Bulletin* 36 (August 1955): 21-22.

⁵² The fact that automobile manufacturers owned some kitchen equipment producers like Frigidaire (General Motors Corporation) and the fact that both industries were closely allied with steel producers furthered the synthesis.

⁵³ Red Mill Lumber Company, "Is Your Kitchen as Modern as Your Car?," [Traverse City, Mich.] *Record Eagle*, January 28, 1955, 13. While the accelerated obsolescence of cars and clothing provided some dealers and advertisers with an model to stimulate regular kitchen improvement, others reversed

wardrobe, the refashioning of the former should be as frequent as the latter.⁵⁴

Advertisers sought to attach a sense of glamour and couture to the postwar kitchen. In 1956 Frigidaire introduced their completely redesigned "Sheer Look" line of appliances, an angular, colorful departure from the streamlined, white and chrome appliances of the interwar and early postwar years. The ad campaign featured models in Oleg Cassini gowns, a high-style runway show with commissioned dresses inspired by the sheer look.⁵⁵ A year later the Youngstown Kitchen Company introduced their new Monterey Kitchen line in an hour-long special broadcast of "The Kate Smith Hour." Building on its banner slogan, "Buy your kitchen as you buy your wardrobe," the campaign equated Youngstown's modular kitchen with a fashionable woman's outfit. Advertising copy referred to base and wall cabinets, sinks, and dishwashers as tops, separates and ensembles, and showed how they could be mixed and matched just like the blouses, skirts, and jackets worn by the accompanying models (Figure 3.5).⁵⁶

the argument seeking to convince homeowners that their remodeled kitchen was a much more secure long-term investment than a new automobile or wardrobe. Gerard Cowan, a kitchen merchandiser in Rockford, Illinois, described how he used the car-kitchen correlation in his sales presentations. "Frequently a prospect remarks that \$3,000 is a lot of money for a new kitchen,' Cowan stated. 'In this case I point out that many men will buy a \$3,000 automobile, see it depreciate 50 percent in two years, and buy another one in four. If the man can make a practice of this, his wife certainly deserves a \$3,000 kitchen which will last a lifetime.'" Cowan went on to state, "I've found that this sales pitch often turns the trick, since the man is usually the one voicing the objection.'" "Seven Keys to Profit...in Complete Kitchens", *Domestic Engineering* (June 1952): 152.

⁵⁴ Consumer psychologist Ernest Dichter of the Motivational Research Institute in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, advised shoe manufacturers to encourage customers to change their shoes as they change their moods. Ernest Dichter, "Don't Sell Shoes...Sell Lovely Feet," *Findings* 2, no. 4 (April, 1966): 4.

⁵⁵ Arthur J. Pulos, *The American Design Adventure, 1940-1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 137. According to Pulos, the move was prompted by technological innovation. "Where once the use of high-temperature glass enamels had necessitated rounded corners for proper flow and fusion, now the introduction of thinner insulation made it possible to use lighter-gauge, prepainted sheet metal, which could be formed into sharp rectangular boxes on new continuous roller machines without stamping and crowning. Moreover, rectangular boxes were in harmony with the International Style of architecture and suitable as 'built-ins.'"

⁵⁶ Youngstown tied a wide-ranging print and media campaign that featured advertisements in *Life* and other consumer magazines and newspapers into the television broadcast. Promotional aids such as

Under the heading "it's a woman's privilege to change her mind" Curtis assured readers that with their wood cabinets (unlike baked enamel) "changing color schemes is easy! Every year, if you like, your Curtis kitchen can appear in a new and different color-dress."⁵⁷ Associating cabinets, tile, and countertops with new cars and clothing endowed the remodeled kitchen with a truncated temporality. It also suggested that kitchens outwardly display a sense of personal style. They were no longer utilitarian workspaces but outward expressions of taste and fashion. Like a wardrobe, the kitchen (even if recently improved) demanded monitoring and vigilant comparison with the most recent fashions; discrepancies between the existing kitchen and what was shown in ads and articles were cause for intervention. Youngstown's Monterey campaign focused not on utility, hygiene, ease, or other mantras that manufacturers and dealers usually deployed to push kitchen upgrades. Instead, the promotion and others like it stressed a visual correlation with and adherence to prevailing trends. Wardrobe and kitchen merged as accouterments of the female body.⁵⁸

window streamers, consumer folders, color ad reprints, and cutout fashion figures were also disseminated to local Youngstown distributors. "TV Spec Introduces Youngstown Ad Drive," *Printer's Ink* (April 12, 1957): 60. The Youngstown advertisement is at: "Buy Your Kitchen as You Buy Your Wardrobe," *Life*, May 13, 1957, 132-133.

⁵⁷ *Curtis Kitchens: Designed and Styled-By Women-For Women* (Clinton, Iowa: Curtis Companies, 1952), 5.

⁵⁸ This rhetorical tack was not without risks. Speeding up the perception of obsolescence could cause skittishness among potential customers unwilling to buy for fear that their remodeled kitchen would be dated the moment it was completed. Aware of such concerns manufacturers developed products that enabled owners to update the look of their kitchens without another full-scale remodeling. Youngstown offered colorful decals that could be adhered to its cabinets to match or complement decorative changes to the rest of the room. International Harvester produced a refrigerator called the 'Decorator', which "permits a homemaker to change the appearance of her refrigerator as often as she would change her mind." Moldings on the fridge door could be removed, fabric applied to the door, trimmed and the moldings reapplied to the edges. According to one article "This revolutionary idea enables her to make the refrigerator a feature of her kitchen decoration by matching or contrasting it with her curtains, walls or floor pattern, by using any shade or any pattern of fabric." "She'll Buy This Dream!" *Domestic Engineering* (February 1953): 107.

A 1949 advertisement for Stroup's Hardware Company in the *Billings* [Montana] *Gazette*, informed local readers that, "A Youngstown Kitchen from Stroup's is your dream's desire, and it's easy to buy."⁵⁹ Throughout the postwar era, boasts like Stroup's were among the most prominent rhetorical devices kitchen manufacturers and promoters deployed.⁶⁰ While characterizing a new home or kitchen as a "dream" or a "dream come true" was not new to the postwar era, nearly two decades of Depression and war-induced austerity had lent the idea a heightened potency.⁶¹ Establishing a link between remodeling and fulfilled desire conflated consumption and sex, lending the dream kitchen a titillating edge that promoters eagerly exploited. Stroup's additional claim that a new kitchen was "easy to buy" suggested that the dream could be immediately realized, by all Americans (or at least the residents of Billings).

Dream kitchen rhetoric echoed the myth of the "American Dream," a series of culturally-shared, yet personal aspirations made attainable through individual initiative in a uniquely American environment of capitalism, democracy, and freedom. The chief marker of American Dream achievement was the single-family home.⁶² Success

⁵⁹ "Stroup's for Youngstown Kitchens," *Billings Gazette*, March 13, 1949, 7.

⁶⁰ Youngstown, Hotpoint, and Morgan were among the most prominent promoters of the dream kitchen. Youngstown offered brochures titled "Dream Kitchens for a Song." Hotpoint had its "Hotpoint 'Dream' Kitchen." See, for example, ads reproduced in: "Kitchen Sales Are Profit Sales: Dealers Promote Kitchen Sales From Coast to Coast," *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): 58-62.

⁶¹ Hoosier Kitchen Cabinets, the leading monolithic kitchen cabinet in the first half of the twentieth century, advertised their product a dream come true. The text of one 1924 ad reads: "If you were to dream of creating for your kitchen a magical fixture which would give you a work-shop as convenient as any ever designed—a worktable that would eliminate the hardest muscular strains of the kitchen—the HOOSIER would be the realization of that dream." Quoted in: Ellen M. Plante, "Hoosier Kitchen Cabinets: Buying and Reviving All-Purpose 'Help-Mates'," *Old-House Journal* 20, no. 5 (September 1992): 42-43.

⁶² See "Chapter 5: Detached Houses: The Dream of Home Ownership" in: Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of An Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA,

stories lent this myth the power of the possible. Yet dreams also represent intangible and unattainable fantasy, an objective perpetually just beyond reach. Tales of the wreckage caused by pursuing the American Dream (unfulfilled like Willy Loman's or unfulfilling like Jay Gatsby's) have proved as potent and durable a cultural theme as the original myth itself.

Remodeling boosters and the consumer public, steeped in postwar optimism and with unwavering faith in American economic progress, obviously saw the dream in positive terms. It was an appropriate metaphor suggesting that after decades of deprivation, Americans' material hopes were finally attainable.⁶³ If a dream was normally relegated to a remote future, kitchen manufacturers promised to erase the distance between that future and the present, between dream and reality. For those on limited budgets, modular product lines enabled incremental kitchen improvement, starting with the sink and base cabinets, adding wall cabinets and other appliances

2003). In a study of twentieth-century consumption in Mississippi, Ted Ownby notes four primary components of the American Dream, the dream of abundance, the dream of a democracy of goods, the dream of freedom of choice, and the dream of novelty. Ted Ownby, *American Dreams: Consumers, Poverty & Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). However, the material, acquisitive emphasis of the contemporary American Dream myth Ownby presents was not central to its original conception, which had a moral and spiritual emphasis.

⁶³ The presentations of dream kitchens in my work are of dreams immediately realized. Laura Scott Holliday explores another side of dream rhetoric, that of futuristic techno-kitchens presented as Kitchens of Tomorrow at fairs, home shows, and department store displays. She analyzes them in terms of promises for the future meant to secure women's agreement to remain domestic today in exchange for a tomorrow technotopia where housework was burden-free. According to Holliday, Kitchens of Tomorrow also functioned as alibis of absence functioning in two ways: excusing the fulfillment of the dreams immediately due to wartime production or other explanation, and the assertion that in the future the wife's presence in the kitchen will be made unnecessary. There is a long history of model houses and kitchens of the future that manufacturers deployed to link their products with a utopian vision of progress while concurrently instilling consumer desire. Such projects are explored in Holliday, "Kitchen Technologies: Promises and Alibis, 1944-1966," Genevieve Bell and Joseph Kaye, "Designing Technology for Domestic Spaces: A Kitchen Manifesto," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 46-62, and H. Ward Jandl, John A. Burns and Michael Auer, *Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow: Innovative American Homes, 1850 to 1950* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1991).

later. As a brochure for Whitehead Kitchens announced, "We offer you a plan that will start making your 'dream kitchen' come true—at once."⁶⁴

The dream kitchen motif functioned in several ways. It was a tool that enabled manufacturers, planners, dealers, and marketers to probe the desires of housewives without limitations. Eliciting the form and appearance of dream kitchens would take place in interviews, questionnaires, and the seemingly informal conversation at a retailer's planning center or the customer's home. Though they could be framed to stir discontent, dream queries were more aspirational in their aim. Freed from issues of cost, practicality, or availability the subject was asked to imagine how their ideal kitchen would be configured or ideal appliance would function. The Institute for Motivational Research, run by the psychologist Ernest Dichter, got its interviewees to daydream in order to "liberate" basic, but unconscious consumer desires.⁶⁵ Manufacturers used the insights to inform the new designs and customize kitchen remodeling projects. Survey results also found their way into subsequent advertising campaigns illustrating how the average woman's needs were the basis for a new product. A 1959 Waste King brochure, for example, stated, "While the Waste King Super Dishwasher-Dryer was still a dream...we asked 1,001 women 'What do you

⁶⁴ *Let's Not Dream About It Any Longer*, (New York: Whitehead Metal Products Company: ca. 1945), 1. Manufacturers and dealers preferred, however, that customers order a complete kitchen, only then was the transformation most dramatic, dream-like...and profitable.

⁶⁵ Ernest Dichter, "'Operation Daydream' Digs Deep—Uncovers Important New Product Data," *Findings* 1 no. 1 (January 1965): 2. Dichter reported that such daydream sessions resulted in a number of new product ideas and improvements, including "Improved storage shelves in kitchen cabinets, similar to roll-out canned goods racks in supermarkets." See also: Ernest Dichter, "New Products From Daydreams," *Findings* 2, no. 9 (October 1966): 2, in which Dichter encouraged daydreaming as a way to identify needs and develop new products, a process today referred to as "brainstorming."

want most from an automatic dishwasher?"⁶⁶ Waste King's question assumed that women wanted a new dishwasher with new features.⁶⁷ Dreaming of new products acculturated consumers in thinking the possible, that the new could be had now and that it would inevitably be better. Dream rhetoric encouraged consumers to distance themselves from their existing possessions and imagine a world beyond, fanning disenchantment with the present and setting their sights on new acts of consumption.

Industry promotional films from the 1950s described the dream kitchen in quite literal terms. General Motors/Frigidaire presented their film *Design for Dreaming* at the corporation's 1956 Motorama car show in New York City. It begins with a housewife receiving a nocturnal visit from a masked stranger who whisks her from bedroom to car show to the futuristic "Kitchen of Tomorrow" featured at the Motorama. A year later, the film *Practical Dreamer*, produced for the United States Steel Corporation linked romantic seduction with consumption and kitchen dreams in a premise surprisingly similar to *Design for Dreaming*. But while the GM film promised high-tech cooking in an indeterminate future, *Practical Dreamer* (as its vaguely-contradictory title suggests) was focused on currently available products, namely steel kitchen cabinets. In the film, the main protagonist, Edie Michaelson, enters the kitchen for a midnight snack where she encounters a disembodied male voice that makes her existing kitchen disappear.⁶⁸ The voice encourages her to sit

⁶⁶ *While the Waste King Super Dishwasher-Dryer Was Still a Dream...We Asked 1,001 Women* (Los Angeles: Waste King Corporation, 1959).

⁶⁷ Yet the survey's findings revealed a more complicated situation than the brochure suggests. Women respondents didn't always want a new dishwasher as much as they wanted their existing dishwasher to work as promised.

⁶⁸ United States Steel, *Practical Dreamer*, 1957, MPEG2 copy of original film, https://archive.org/details/0238_Practical_Dreamer_09_11_13_00 (accessed January 5, 2013).

down and plan a new, dream kitchen to replace the old. When she wakes up she is unsure whether the visitor and design session was real or a product of her nocturnal imagination.

Both films suggested that the housewife's dream also included a partner capable of recognizing the value of kitchen improvements and, by extension, the value of the wife who worked there. The mysterious male visitors in *Design for Dreaming* and *Practical Dreamer* promised homemakers salvation from their outdated kitchens. They offered a sensitive and seductive counter to husbands who were unresponsive to their wives' needs for new cabinets, appliances, and finishes. Cuckolded by their wives, emasculated and ridiculed by neighbors, the intractable (or oblivious) husband does not get off easy in remodeling promotions.

A third film, "A Word to the Wives" by *Women's Home Companion* magazine implies that husband George Peters's unfamiliarity of his wife Jane's struggles in an outmoded kitchen and his own ineptitude there are accompanied by a corresponding sexual unfamiliarity and ineptitude. After describing her old kitchen to a neighbor Jane laments, "I wish George would do something about it. All he's done so far is talk, and not with any real enthusiasm." When she leaves for the weekend and George tries to cook in the old kitchen, the neighbor observes in a voice-over aside to the viewer, "now if he had just let his rice simmer instead of boiling. But frankly I doubt if George knew how to bring things to a simmer."⁶⁹ The neighbor equates George's kitchen cluelessness to erotic incompetence, and Jane to a pot of rice.

⁶⁹ *A Word to the Wives*, Telamerica, Inc., 1955, MPEG2 copy of original film, <https://archive.org/details/Wordtoth1955> (Accessed April 15, 2013).

The disembodied paramour who visits Edie Michaelson in *Practical Dreamer* is a literal voice of reason, serving as a proxy husband who understands her frustrations and is eager to help remedy them. In encouraging Edie to undertake to remake her kitchen he is both assertive and coy (at one point he asks if she is married, to which Edie replies with an equal dose of coyness "why, of course").⁷⁰ Like Cinderella after the ball, Edie awakens twirling a golden high-heel shoe in her hand. She is reassured that her dream was real only when she finds a planning guide tucked in her nightstand, a keepsake from her Prince Charming.⁷¹

While the postwar housewife was encouraged to fantasize about a man who supported a remodeling job, no mention was made of him contributing to the work in the kitchen. As other family members were increasingly welcome in the kitchen space (and as the kitchen began to blend with living rooms and dining rooms), even dreams were not sufficiently strong to overcome ingrained gender roles. The kids might play there, the husband may occasionally run the dishwasher, and perhaps be convinced of the wisdom of new cabinets, but in the end the daily work would remain the

⁷⁰ United States Steel, *Practical Dreamer*.

⁷¹ As another 1950s promotional film depicted, future homemakers did not always immediately recognize the allure of a man sensitive to the advantages of an efficient kitchen. A 1952 production called *Young Man's Fancy* sponsored by the Edison Electric Institute tells the story of a young college student who is enthralled by time and motion studies and electrical appliances. Alexander Phipps's interest in domestic technology is incomprehensible to Judy Adams, the teenage daughter of Alexander's friend. Judy wants to dance and date, not discuss the advantages of electric dishwashers. Throughout the half-hour, sit-com like film, the Adams family's various kitchen and home improvements—electric irons, radios, hot water heaters, ranges—feature prominently. Alexander expresses warm approval for Judy's parent's efficient kitchen. "Notice how it all adds up to one important thing?" he says. "What?" she replies. "Consideration for the housewife." Eventually, Judy comes to admire Alex's fascination and he comes to admire her electrically-aided cooking skills. *Young Man's Fancy* heavily-handedly demonstrated how electrification and new appliances eased kitchen drudgery. It also presented the idealized man, who knows the importance of domestic improvement. *Young Man's Fancy*, Edison Electric, 1952, MPEG2 copy from original film, https://archive.org/details/0179_Young_Mans_Fancy_22_01_18_00 (Accessed April 13, 2013).

housewife's responsibility. With this premise unchallenged, the focus of the dream kitchen was on reducing the physical burden and increasing the emotional attitude of the woman ensconced there.

The dream remodeled kitchen was one in which the responsibilities culturally ascribed to the homemaker—to plan and prepare meals, to clean up after them and more generally to maintain the well-being and presentability of all family members—were converted to enjoyable, fulfilling tasks. Life in the dream kitchen would be made more pleasurable through two processes. First, the jobs undertaken there would take less time and require less effort; second, the kitchen would be remade as a more inviting space that expressed the housewife's individual tastes and personality.

Mitigating the labor involved in kitchen work and ennobling the housewife who did it, were foundational goals of domestic engineering and a constant refrain of both Kitchen of Tomorrow and kitchen remodeling promoters.⁷² In the postwar era, it became a point of national pride that American kitchens were less and less settings for female drudgery, that American capitalism and industry were liberating women from kitchen servitude.⁷³ The consumption of technology was to be a means of reducing kitchen work, through new appliances that shortened prep and clean up time and

⁷² Of course, as the various depictions of Kitchens of Tomorrow indicate, the ultimate goal was to eliminate kitchen labor entirely, freeing the housewife to take up more enriching past times. American culture, however, was unable to resolve ambiguous feelings about the liberated housewife. While the existing kitchen represented drudgery that modern progress should eradicate, it also centered the unique female responsibility for raising and caring for the American nuclear family.

⁷³ Reducing kitchen labor was touted as an uniquely American accomplishment in the series of verbal exchanges that took place in Moscow in 1958 between U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In the discussions, which came to be known as the Kitchen Debate, Nixon explicitly stated that of American kitchen technology was “designed to make things easier for our women.” Throughout the Cold War, the chic American housewife liberated by American technology was frequently compared to dowdy Soviet women, consumed by laborious, primitive domestic and factory work. See: Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939-1959* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 3.

reduced fatigue (by displacing labor from human muscle to electric motors), through new stain and dirt-resistant surfaces that promised an end to constant cleaning, and through the studied, rational arrangement of cabinets and work centers. A Morgan Company brochure claimed their cabinets could release "the fortunate home-maker from drudgery, makes cleaning easier, with definite savings in time and steps. Women get better results with less effort in this modernly arranged kitchen in contrast with the daily struggle in the old-fashioned, inefficient kitchen with outmoded equipment."⁷⁴

Remodeling promoters' predominant focus on making kitchens less dreary and full of drudgery was, in some ways, an act of deflection. Blame for hard kitchen work was placed exclusively on the shoulders of old-fashioned layouts and equipment. Change to the home's physical arrangement was the prescribed remedy rather than addressing more systemic acts and attitudes of gender oppression. Efficiency as a primary goal of domestic science was criticized as early as the 1920s by feminists such as Anne Martin, who felt that this emphasis detracted from more fundamental issues of economic and political equality.⁷⁵ It was an argument picked up and recast for a new generation of housewives by Betty Friedan, in her seminal 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*.⁷⁶

The remodeled kitchen was supposedly less laborious because its layout and technology worked with, rather than against, the housewife. It was a pleasant place to

⁷⁴ *Your Modern Kitchen: Sectional Wood Cabinets Produced by Master Craftsmen* (Oshkosh, WI: Morgan, 1954), 4.

⁷⁵ Martin's criticism was aimed specifically at Marie Meloney, co-founder of the Better Homes Movement and editor of the magazine, *The Delineator*. See: Janet Anne Hutchison, "American Housing, Gender and the Better Homes Movement, 1922-1935" (PhD Dissertation, University of Delaware, December, 1989), 52.

⁷⁶ Though Friedan substituted consumption for efficiency as the displacing objective. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

spend time supposedly because of its colorful, bright decorative scheme that bespoke its user's personality. The postwar dream kitchen featured pleasing color palettes and patterns, as well as appliances, cabinets, and counters styled traditionally or with modern influences, all in accord with her tastes. To bring the efficient and enjoyable dream kitchen into being, remodeling promoters called for the personalization of the kitchen and the involvement of the housewife in planning and deciding how it would be personalized.

Personalizing for Habits, Tastes, and Body

The attention to home and kitchen personalization came at a time when social observers suggested that American wives were experiencing an identity crisis. Inundated with images of the ideal wife, mother, and homemaker, selfless and fulfilled, they lacked the ability to understand who they really were beyond those roles. Betty Friedan labeled this misleading popular image of postwar women completely content with their domestic lot the "feminine mystique." According to Friedan, "The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question 'Who am I?' by saying 'Tom's wife . . . Mary's mother.'"⁷⁷ The mystique can be discerned in kitchen remodeling advertisements and articles that prompted women to seek the answer to 'Who am I?' in the arrangement of steel kitchen cabinets, or the selection of kitchen paint colors and curtain patterns.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 126. The passage continues, "As the motivational researchers keep telling the advertisers, American women are so unsure of who they should be that they look to the glossy public image to decide every detail of their lives."

Manufacturers, educators, advertisers, magazine editors, and motivational psychologists all told postwar American housewives that consumption was the solution to such crises of identity.⁷⁸ Women secured liberation from the burdens of domestic life not through a more equitable career access and apportioning of domestic and family responsibilities among all family members. Instead, products and promotions provided freedom. Creative, identity-affirming consumption precluded making do with someone else's kitchen. Retailers and manufacturers pushed for remodeling not only when new owners took possession of a house, but (if financial circumstances permitted) whenever the housewife no longer felt it expressed who she was or who she wanted to be. If you were modern and your kitchen was dated, the incongruity had to be addressed. If your family grew or contracted, the kitchen layout should respond. If you took up baking or stopped entertaining, your cabinets and layout should show it. If housewives came to accept and assume this premise, the stage was set for a cycle of frequent kitchen remodeling.

Household management embraced the methodologies of science—observation, calculation, and quantification—to develop optimal kitchen designs tailored to the average homemaker. In the first half of the twentieth century, domestic engineers such

⁷⁸ Betty Friedan visited Ernest Dichter's New York headquarters and included quotes from the psychologist and his motivational studies in her book. Most relevant to our discussion, Dichter explained his theory on consumption's liberating function. "Properly manipulated (if you are not afraid of that word) American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self realization, even the sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things..." "In a free enterprise economy we have to develop the need for new products. And to do that we have to liberate women to desire these new products... This can be manipulated, we sell them what they ought to want, speed up the unconscious, move it along... The manufacturer wants her back in the kitchen—and we show him how to do it the right way. If he tells her all she can be is a wife and mother, she will spit in his face. But we show him how to tell her that it's creative to be in the kitchen, we liberate her need to be creative in the kitchen." *Ibid.*, 301.

as Lillian Galbreth adopted a range of industrial efficiency tools—time-motion studies, "process-trip charts," micro-motion transfer sheets—to isolate potential savings in muscle energy and minutes and seconds with the goal of eliminating any form of waste. Publications that came out of these studies specified the ideal height and position of cabinets, shelves, and appliances for the average user. They considered the kitchen a space configurable through precise empirical study.⁷⁹ Kitchen calibrators, reconciling environment and human body through idealized measurement, had much in common with Modernist architects who used mathematics as a universal generative tool to achieve artistic compositions thought to exhibit a timeless order and rigor. Math and geometry granted access to harmony, the honest composition of forms equally beautiful and functional. The architect Le Corbusier intended his Modulor dimensional system, developed during World War II, to serve as an underlying proportional code, keying architectural space making (especially industrial housing designs) to the stature of an idealized human body.⁸⁰ The burgeoning fields of anthropometrics and ergonomics also provided a basis for user-centered design. Architect Henry Dreyfuss's 1959 book *The Measure of Man*, featured numerous drawings of Joe and Josephine, two theoretically average, minutely-annotated human figures designers could use to proportion a variety of objects from chairs and

⁷⁹ Many university home economic and home design research programs promulgated kitchen design guidelines in the postwar era. Two of the most active were the University of Illinois' Small Homes Council and the Cornell Housing Research Center.

⁸⁰ See: Judi Loach, "Le Corbusier and the Creative Use of Mathematics," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 31, no. 2 (June 1998): 185-215. Corbusier considered the Modulor a universal system that would be used to rationalize and standardize mass housing construction throughout the postwar world. While intending it as a humanist tool, Corbusier failed to see such rigorous codes as potentially oppressive and stifling to both architects and occupants.

doorknobs to car interiors and stenographer desks.⁸¹

Postwar kitchen designers embraced this focus on metrics and the corporeal housewife (Figure 3.6). Almost without exception, manufacturer brochures described the distances a housewife had to walk in a typical day preparing meals. Rationalized cabinet and counter arrangements, based on the concept of work centers (separate areas dedicated to preparing food, cooking, and cleaning) promised to reduce the fatigue associated with old inefficient kitchens. *Domestic Engineering* observed that, "Kitchen cabinets also have kept pace with the trend to time-saving, wife saving design."⁸² Experts developed specific features to reduce the strain of kitchen work such as shallow cabinets that allowed an instant visual survey of its contents, and inset spaces below base cabinets that accommodated the housewife's toes (making it unnecessary to lean over a work surface). For the same reason manufacturers also inset cabinets located below the sink. Harrison Steel Cabinet Company called them "recessed 'knee-zone' sink fronts."⁸³ Adjustable counters and shelves, along with accessories such as roll-out storage bins, drawers, and lazy susans represented kitchen designers' efforts to accommodate modern kitchen usage. These options were part of a larger efforts to marry mass production with customization, the presentation to the customer of a kitchen that fit them uniquely, yet, thanks to factory production, was financially accessible.

First presented to the public in 1952, the Cornell Kitchen attempted to bridge

⁸¹ Henry Dreyfuss, *The Measure of Man: Human Factors in Design* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1960).

⁸² "A Kitchen Is Made of Many Pieces," *Domestic Engineering* (October 1954): 157.

⁸³ "Harrison Has Your Package Kitchens Tailored in Life-Time Steel," *Domestic Engineering* (October 1952): 137.

the space between adaptability and standardization.⁸⁴ The Cornell University Housing Research Center, led by director Glenn H. Beyer, home-management professor Mary Koll Heiner, and faculty from the home economics, agricultural engineering, architecture, and social psychology departments explored the socioeconomic conditions of American housing and developed planning guides in response. They based their design criteria on the results of filmed time-motion studies (which they called "memomotion movies,") oxygen consumption analyses, interviews, and field-testing.

The Center's kitchen project sought to bring advances in anthropocentric planning to the mass market. Made of inexpensive, standardized parts, the Cornell Kitchen was intended from the outset for replication and easy installation in existing homes. Comparing it to an automobile, one of the five wives who tested experimental models in their home said, "one price for the machine and it's ready to roll."⁸⁵ Yet the Cornell Kitchen was highly adaptable. It featured a series of counter and base cabinet units (range center, mix center, serve center, sink center, fridge center) that could be arranged independently (Figure 3.7). Once delivered to the customer, installers would set the cabinets on bookshelf-like brackets so that the counter height fit the height of the woman using it. Her forearm would remain parallel to the properly calibrated counter surface while she cut, chopped, mixed, and stirred. The kitchen's discrete work areas with integrated lighting and appliances were easy to plug into an existing room

⁸⁴ The objectives, development, and features of the Cornell Kitchen project were discussed in the book: Glenn H. Beyer, *The Cornell Kitchen: Product Design Through Research* (Ithaca, N.Y.: New York State College of Home Economics in association with the Cornell University Housing Research Center, 1953). It also received considerable attention in the popular press.

⁸⁵ "American Kitchen Takes Off in Two Directions," *Look* 20, no. 9 (May 1, 1956): 40.

and easy to relocate as needs or preferences changed. Like the Acme Steel cabinets promoted as being so easily modified that a child could do it, Cornell Kitchen adjustments were touted as "a one-man job—no more trouble than making something with an erector set."⁸⁶

Although Cornell's Housing Research Center planned to license the kitchen to prospective manufacturers on a royalty arrangement, no manufacturer stepped up to produce it. When homeowners who had read of the kitchen or who had seen it featured in a 14-minute television program made in cooperation with Reynolds Metals Company, inquired about its availability, Beyer wrote that several companies were seriously considering production of the units but that more time was needed to determine its feasibility. Other correspondence suggests that high projected manufacturing costs scared away potential producers.⁸⁷ While the complete Cornell Kitchen was never manufactured in large quantities, its ideals of standardized adjustability did make their way into at least one mass-produced line. The Long-Bell Lumber Company of Kansas City, Missouri developed the "Posture Perfect Kitchen," with sliding, adjustable, and removable wood cabinet shelves. Advertisements claimed that it was "built from the research of home economists."⁸⁸ For the most part, though, user-focused customization remained the privilege of those paying for individually designed and fabricated kitchens. One-off remodeled kitchen designs easily fit sinks,

⁸⁶ Gardner Soule, "New Kitchen Built to Fit Your Wife," *Popular Science* 163, no. 3 (September 1953): 176.

⁸⁷ Beyer's papers, which reside in Cornell University Library's Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, contain numerous references to such efforts.

⁸⁸ "It's New! It's Easy to Install!," *Nashua [Iowa] Reporter*, January 31, 1952, 2.

ranges, and work surfaces to the client's exact dimensions and way of working.⁸⁹

Whether mass-produced or one-of-a-kind, new remodeled kitchens (and the appliances that populated them) often appeared as robot-like substitutes for the female body.⁹⁰ Salesmen shared pitches promising that a new dishwasher could preserve the housewife's youthful looks and inhibit the passage of time. "No more red dishpan hands—save money on lotion—save money having hair done (because the dish-washer reduces moisture in the air)—stay younger looking longer."⁹¹ At the same time, experts argued that middle-aged homemakers, without the strength and stamina

⁸⁹ A 1964 newspaper article based on a Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Information Bureau publication reminded remodeling prospects that such tailored kitchens, "can be a real wife-saver." "Kitchen Can Fit Homemaker Like a Glove," *Lewiston Sun and Journal*, April 28, 1964, 9A. While some custom kitchens were based on the measured height of the client, prefabricated modular kitchens used appropriate heights promulgated by trade organizations, home economic department publications, or manufacturers. There was not unanimity among these groups about such dimensions. The Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Information Bureau claimed that since the average woman in the United States stood five-foot three-inches, surfaces should be installed thirty-six inches above the floor. Maud Williams, writing for the Oregon Agricultural Experiment Station stated the best counter height for a woman of average stature was thirty-two inches. The studies Williams uses as a basis for her guidance also specified counters two to three inches higher for kitchens where men worked. Maud Wilson, *Considerations in Planning Kitchen Cabinets* (Corvallis, Oregon: Oregon State System of Higher Education, Agricultural Experiment Station, Oregon State College, 1947), 29.

⁹⁰ In the correlation of homemaker's body to the kitchen in which she worked the female was occasionally considered a stand-in for equipment. Indeed the wife as machine was the unstated principle upon which Taylorist kitchen engineering was based. Husbands could also equate wife to machine as a means of staving off new purchases. When *Domestic Engineering* conducted a survey to gauge the demand for home improvement in a typical American town, one respondent answered the question 'Do you own a dishwasher?' with the reply, 'I married the best one in the world 30 years ago and am planning no replacement. A little remodeling might help, however.'" "He Married a Dishwasher," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1952): 12. More often, the kitchen, and the appliances and products that populated it, were portrayed as a substitute and balm for the tired, over-worked arms, legs, and back of the housewife, whatever her age.

⁹¹ "Greatest Emancipator Since 19th Amendment," 125. The same article notes that husbands with sick wives could be persuaded to purchase dishwashers to lessen her work. Nineteenth century domestic scientists and writers Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, though always game for reducing labor in the kitchen, didn't go for what they saw as excessive female coddling. In their 1869 book *The American Woman's Home* they argued that the "neglect of the muscular system" caused by rural educational reforms had introduced "great inefficiency in practical domestic duties" as time spent on practical tasks such as sewing, cooking, and animal tending had caused the appearance of "fragile, easily-fatigued, languid girls of the modern age." Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home: Principles of Domestic Science* (Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, 2008), 317.

of their younger counterparts, were in special need of efficient kitchens. The authors of a 1951 Cornell University guide to organized kitchen work centers stressed their advantages to the older homemaker. "That we are an aging population and that health handicaps are increasing with this aging population is a commonplace. Cardiac ailments are high on this list. Eye difficulties are greater with the aging of women than of men." To be relevant and effective the authors argued that kitchens must be updated to "meet the changing demands of the mid-century population."⁹²

Improved kitchens could reduce the housewife's physical strain while also improving her mental well-being. Postwar sales promotions that promised new kitchens as antidotes for a woman's precarious psychological state relied on stereotypes about the shrewish housewife and male's shared sympathy about having to put up with her. A 1952 trade journal article advised salesmen selling husbands on remodeling to mention that a new "automatic dishwasher would reduce the irritability of the housewife and make her more pleasant and cheerful."⁹³ Michelle Corrodi has traced efforts to protect the housewife's body and psyche back to the nineteenth century. "Either fatigue or an overtaxed physical constitution were put to blame when a housewife demonstrated typical symptoms like irritability, temper, or fainting spells. Preventative strategies focused on the reduction of housework and optimal efficiency; fatigue was ascribed not least to antiquated organization of the home and to poorly

⁹² Mary Koll Heiner and Rose E. Steidl, *Guide for Arrangement of Urban Family Kitchens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, 1951), 49.

⁹³ "Greatest Emancipator Since 19th Amendment," 126.

equipped working areas."⁹⁴

Ergonomic customization was ostensibly intended to ease the homemaker's labor and strain. But it also had an important marketing function. The owner of a customized kitchen could feel that their kitchens were physically calibrated to their own proportions and work habits. Their kitchen was distinct and different from their neighbors'. Housewives who were stuck in pre-World War II kitchens or even owners of relatively new kitchens built in suburban tracts, were encouraged to resent that the position of their countertops and location of their cabinets made kneading bread, washing dishes, or putting away groceries a bit more strenuous on their back and shoulders than necessary. At the end of the day, as the postwar housewife thumbed through a copy of *Better Homes & Gardens*, she could blame her existing cabinets for all her aches and see the gleaming new kitchen in the ads as a literal cure all. Old kitchens hurt, new kitchens didn't.

While new appliances and layouts promised to make domestic work less physically onerous, manufacturers, dealers, and advertisers also argued that the look of the old kitchen needed to be refreshed, that the times called for a more cheerfully decorated space that expressed the homemaker's tastes and style. Remodeling promoters suggested coordinated walls and cabinets, colored appliances, and patterned flooring and counter finishes the attractive kitchen could be another crucial palliative for drudgery⁹⁵ For those who could not afford a complete remodeling, new flooring,

⁹⁴ Michelle Corrodi, "On the Kitchen and Vulgar Odors," in *The Kitchen (Living Concepts)*, ed. Klaus Spechtenhauser (Boston: Birkhäuser, 2001), 21.

⁹⁵ The suggestion that bright colors and cheerful decoration lighten the burdens of kitchen work predated the end of World War II. The 1937 pamphlet *The Well Planned Kitchen* by Lillian Keller of

wallpaper, or paint could provide partial improvement of existing spaces. According to *Better Homes & Gardens*, particular paint shades and particular wallpaper patterns could “create optical illusions that are nearly as effective as structural changes and much less expensive.”⁹⁶ Warm ceiling tints seemed to reduce their height (as do vertical striped wallpaper), cool tints on walls made a room seem larger. The result of these large and small projects, said boosters, was a brightness warmth that would make the housewife’s time in the kitchen pleasurable. Berger cabinets promised their customers “You’ll sing through happier kitchen hours...in bright, cheerful surroundings.”⁹⁷ Increasing attention to the kitchen as a decorative space reflected the room’s shift from single-function food workshop to living space shared by the whole family. In time, the decorated kitchen became a showroom that owners wanted to display to visitors. By the mid-1960s, textured, naturalistic finishes and materials—stained wood cabinets, wall fabrics, even carpeting—combined with open floor plans

the University of Tennessee Cooperative Extension argued, “color in the kitchen has won its way, and is here to stay. Bright painted flower pots with growing plants, colorful enamel utensils, and gay curtains pushed back from the kitchen window, through which the tired worker may get a glimpse of green trees and the flower garden outside, do much to lighten the tasks and shorten the hours.” During the postwar period, however, the coloring of the kitchen took on a personal objective. Color selection and other decorating decisions were to serve not only to brighten up the space and make it more cheerful, but also to be an expression of the housewife’s personality. Lillian L. Keller, *The Well Planned Kitchen* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, February, 1937), 7.

⁹⁶ John Normile, “Fresh Beauty for Old Walls,” in *Better Homes & Gardens New Ideas for Remodeling Your Home* (New York: Meredith Publishing Company, 1945), 178.

⁹⁷ *Planning Your Kitchen Is Fun!* (Canton, Ohio: Republic Steel Corporation, 1950), 1. The Morgan Company, manufacturer of wood cabinets, called on homeowners to “Make Your Kitchen a Place of Good Cheer!” and “Smile Every Step of the Day in Your Morgan Kitchen!” Your Modern Kitchen: Sectional Wood Cabinets Produced by Master Craftsmen 6. The belief that new design could convert tedious and tiring chores into joyful acts transcended national boundaries. In the 1930s, the Dutch Housewives’ Association president predicted that a new modernist kitchen that the group commissioned would have women see work there not as a ‘businesslike duty but as a poetic pleasure.’ Quoted in: Liesbeth Bervoets, “‘Consultation Required!’: Women Coproducing the Modern Kitchen in the Netherlands, 1920-1970,” in *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*, eds. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 216.

to complete the kitchen's integration with living room and dining room.

In the 1950s colorful kitchens, introduced in the interwar years, increasingly became de rigour. An expanding range of paint, wallpaper, and tile hues, accompanied colorful kitchen wear—plastic bowls and rubber coated utensils, Fiesta plates and copper pots. Market research indicated that 50% of housewives surveyed were planning to change the color scheme in their kitchens, most in the next five years.⁹⁸ This, despite the contradictory way manufacturers and retailers used color in kitchen improvement promotion. On the one hand, they based color marketing on national trends and expert authority, pushing cyclical shifts in taste and perceived obsolescence. On the other hand, they reserved color as a highly individual choice. Colorful walls, cabinets, floors and blenders were a way to both signal participation and inclusion in a shared national culture of (officially-sanctioned) style and to express one's unique identity.

The increasing role color played on purchasing decisions was problematic for steel kitchen manufacturers. Until they introduced cabinets with colored enamel finish around the middle of the 1950s, their lines consisted exclusively of monochromatic white cabinets.⁹⁹ To pitch around this fact, manufacturers proposed that their cabinets be considered the stable background for a customized decorative plan. White (or stainless steel) equipment, according to their producers, were the best choice for those

⁹⁸ "Kitchen Sales Are Profit Sales: Capitalize on the Kitchen Market," *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): 48-49.

⁹⁹ Both Republic and Youngstown introduced cabinets in a range of colors beginning in 1955. This development, however, did not delay a permanent decline in steel kitchen sales that began the following year.

seeking a truly versatile and easily altered decor.¹⁰⁰ Youngstown Kitchens's "Controlled Color Kitchen Decorating" campaign of 1954 argued that, "Rich, soft white Youngstown Kitchens units make the color control possible...because cabinets in anything else but white would restrict your choice of schemes when planning. If your new plan conflicted with your cabinet color, you would be faced with the high cost of refinishing." The plan provided customers with guidance from artists and decorators for selecting draperies, wall coverings, and countertops that could "blend together harmoniously into countless combination possibilities to express your own taste, your individuality."¹⁰¹

The Youngstown campaign neatly illustrates the contradiction between professional authority and personal choice mentioned above. Building material companies, like Youngstown, boasted of employing "color scientists," artists, or other experts to provide guidance on complementary color combinations and color balancing. Experts also surveyed consumer color preferences around the country.¹⁰² This knowledge was then passed on to the consumer through brochures, advertisements, and the product's color palette. Yet, remodeling boosters also stated that color choice was a highly individual affair. Color made a house a home, it made a

¹⁰⁰ Some appliance and stainless steel cabinet manufacturers also took up this argument in their promotions. Calling out the supposed limitations of such lines, Morgan Manufacturing Company told dealers that their wood cabinets could be painted, stained or left natural and as a result were preferred by women as they offer a wider decorative choice. "Women Show a Preference for Morgan Pinewood Kitchen Cabinets," *American Lumberman* (September 9, 1950): 64.

¹⁰¹ Youngstown Kitchens, *Hints for the Care and Use of Diana-Style Youngstown Kitchens* (Warren, Ohio: Morg: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, September, 1954), back cover.

¹⁰² They also turned to established cultural icons (and their name recognition) as markers of color expertise. Colonial Revival buildings built from the 1930s on were often painted with the Williamsburg Colors, shades derived from the ongoing restoration at the colonial site and marketed as a set palette. In 1956, Frank Lloyd Wright collaborated with Martin-Senour Paint Company to release a palette of 36 colors he called "Taliesin."

kitchen, *your* kitchen (Figure 3.8). In the end, proper color selection could even ensure familial happiness. The Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Company told its customers “Color has an emotional quality. Talk to color scientists and they'll tell you that your choice of colors tells the particular kind of person you are. You like some colors, dislike others. Members of your family feel the same way. Now, if you had a meeting of the minds on color you could easily find 'common denominators' that would give a real *personal* flavor to your home, make all of you happy” [emphasis in original].¹⁰³

While advertisements and marketing materials emphasized individual expression, national preferences and their distillation in the color range offered by the manufacturer confined the extent of that expression. The professional also played a prominent role in influencing tastes and channeling personalization, a topic that is taken up in the following chapter. Perhaps to some consumers, choosing among an expertly demarcated set of options was sufficient. Staff from Ernest Dichter's Institute for Motivational Research wrote in 1956 that women rarely requested custom paint tints. They were usually satisfied with those a store's decorating assistant or paint department sales clerk recommended. The author of the study ascribed this to women being unsure about their taste in color and deference to the tastes of whatever 'expert' assisted them.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ The same brochure, though, featured a detailed description of how colors for the company's line of ceramic tiles were selected and “color-balanced” by those “internationally-recognized” color authorities. *Personally Yours: Suntile by Cambridge* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Co., 1949), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Craig, “The Best Kitchens Are Planned by Exasperated Women.” Such reactions may also be attributed to what Dichter's firm called “the misery of choice problem,” the debilitating variety of options available to consumers in a society of abundance. The challenge this phenomenon posed to manufacturers was mentioned in: Irving Gilman, “Letter Proposal 5-8-57 Selvage and Lee re Wallpaper

As with the deployment of dream rhetoric, the emphasis on color and decor reveals a remodeling industry working to create demand as much meeting demand. Though there was legitimate need to improvement campaigns (kitchens did wear, and valid helpful innovations did appear), it was in large part a market where desire for the newest fashions was stimulated. Calls for remodeled kitchens hung on perception and status, no less than practical concerns for efficiency and labor reduction. In fact, the kitchen's look became more important to housewives as kitchens moved from functional workspaces, to decorated spaces of social expression and perception management.

Conclusion

Personalization rhetoric was central to postwar kitchen remodeling promotion. As a first step, remodeling boosters encouraged in homeowners and housewives a sense of dissatisfaction with their existing kitchen arrangements. Building on real technological advances in appliances and surface materials, manufacturers accelerated the pace of innovation and speeded the sense that current set ups were out of date. The notion of the "dream kitchen" helped stimulate both dissatisfaction and desire. It may have taken a late night liaison but the fantasy kitchen and the fantasy spouse who recognized its importance were available today, at least according to the advertisements. Housewives were told that remodeled kitchens should be bright and colorful spaces that accommodated a variety of functions beyond food preparation and cleanup. To support this contention, building product manufacturers introduced a range of models,

Council," unpublished proposal for motivation research for Wallpaper Council, (Croton-on-Hudson: Institute for Motivational Research, May 8, 1957).

patterns, colors and styles designed to appeal to different customers. The personalized kitchen would make work in that room easier and more pleasurable, thereby preserving the homemaker's sanity and body.

Efforts to stimulate remodeling demand through personalization and active consumer engagement were not undertaken without friction and ambivalence. Customization was hard to achieve as prefabricated steel cabinets became a primary means of improving kitchens. As the next chapter will discuss, sharing design authority with the housewife was problematic due to established gender stereotypes and the growth of the kitchen planner/specialist profession, which was eager to take up the design reins. In the end, while there were nods to making one's kitchen an exact expression of oneself, the choices often proved illusory and the autonomy and involvement of the consumer in design was limited by the prerogatives of (usually male) dealers and designers as well as the rationalizing dictates of prefabricated kitchen production. For these reasons, kitchen customization and complete kitchen planning, when advocated by the manufacturers and installers of prefabricated equipment was always a partially fulfilled promise.

The desire to create a kitchen that was both ergonomically responsive and comfortable for its primary occupant seem complimentary. But an emphasis on the body and efficiency could, ironically, reduce the livability of the space, a problem compounded by mass production processes that further restricted variety. When efficiency was achieved through reliance upon technology, the result could be anonymous rooms in which the housewife felt she had no responsibility and no affinity, in other words, where she could not live. Few would argue that it was

possible for the Cornell Kitchen to easily reflect the personality of its owner, regardless of the work unit arrangement. As Genevieve Bell and Joseph Kaye have observed that, "In creating technology for the home, in particular for the kitchen, technologists have forgotten that these domestic spaces are inhabited and used by people. These spaces function not as sites for technologists' or technological in(ter)vention, but as sites where meaning is produced, as well as meals. These spaces are the places where we dwell."¹⁰⁵ As the authors suggest, dwelling requires the creation of myths about who we are and how we interpret and understand our lives. Remodeling boosters rightly argued that they were providing a service, meeting popular desires for new efficiencies and layouts that would ease toils in the nation's many kitchens that had not been altered in decades. Yet, manufacturers and their advertising agencies, local dealers, and the new ranks of 'kitchen specialists' also targeted new suburban homeowners and those otherwise content with their kitchens. Remodeling promoters were not just meeting existing demand, but were also creating demand through the sowing of dissatisfaction and promising of a more happy and fulfilling home life made possible by a new kitchen. Whether the housewife was already fed up with her current kitchen and just needed a final nudge to remodel, or until that moment she had considered her kitchen entirely adequate (or even liked it), the primary promotional intention was to incite consumption. Manufacturers, dealers, and advertisers promised the housewife that new kitchen products, new finishes, new colors were a source of liberation from the drudgery of traditional kitchen work. They assured women (and their spouses) that happiness and physical resilience lay in the

¹⁰⁵ Bell and Kaye, "Designing Technology for Domestic Spaces: A Kitchen Manifesto", 46.

reconfiguration of her environment. But this happiness and was tied to no other end than her continued service of the family in the kitchen. Even the time that new kitchens supposedly opened up to the housewife was supposed to be directed to wholesome activities that strengthened family and community.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ This was akin to what Wendy Gan identified in the earlier part of the twentieth century as a "chestnut of an argument" in women's emancipation, "that grants liberty to women only to re-situate her, new and improved, back in the home." Wendy Gan, "Solitude and Community: Virginia Woolf, Spatial Privacy and *A Room of One's Own*." *Literature and History* 18 (2005): 73.



Figure 3.1. A Republic Steel spiral pamphlet sets the company's modern cabinets in a traditional setting alongside a manual coffee grinder and kettles, checkered wallpaper pattern, lace curtains and a reproduction oil lamp. The effect was to domesticate the steel kitchen and render it less industrial and supposedly more attractive to female consumers.

Source: Pamphlet. *See for Yourself How Easy It Is to Plan a New Republic Steel Kitchen*. Republic Steel Kitchens, ca. 1955.



Figure 3.2. Gender stereotypes were reinforced through advertisements and promotions in which the husband bestows a new kitchen on a grateful wife.

Source: *American Lumberman*, June 4, 1949.



Figure 3.3. The husband struggles with old cabinets in the promotional film *A Word to the Wives*. Only when left alone in his wife's stead does he recognize the inefficiencies of her old kitchen and support a replacement.

Source: Telamerica, Inc. *A Word to the Wives*. Directed by Norman Lloyd. 1955.



Figure 3.4. While manufacturers promised their modern remodeled kitchens would be inviting places for the whole family, the husband was often depicted in promotional literature as an incompetent interloper in the female-ruled kitchen.

Source: Pamphlet. Youngstown Kitchens, *Dream Kitchen for a Song* (Warren, Ohio: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, ca. 1955).



The MONTEREY Basic

Your basic group in warm-toned "Sandalwood" custom steel units...a beautiful non-splash Diana sink bowl with ample storage space beneath; two base cabinets, one with four drawers; notice those Monterey exclusive "Pantry Cabinets" with handy storage space and special built-in lighting for your work surfaces. A Future-Fashioned Kitchen, about \$295.



MONTEREY Toppers

A slightly bigger kitchen wardrobe, the Basic plus two Monterey wall cabinets. These have glowing hardwood doors in "Sandalwood," the shelves and sides of matching tone in custom steel. You also add the roomy utility cabinet. And you discover anew how wonderfully this rich tone blends with any color and furniture decor. This version of your Future-Fashioned Youngstown Kitchen, about \$425.



Figure 3.5. Mass-produced kitchen manufacturers equated their modular product lines of base and wall cabinets with the elements of a stylish wardrobe. Both required attention to color and coordination, and both required regular updating to stay in fashion.

Source: Advertisement. "Buy your kitchen as you buy your wardrobe...New Future-Fashioned Monterey." *Life* (May 13, 1957), 132.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 3.6. The mix center cabinet that Cornell University's Agricultural Experiment Station developed as part of its guidelines for functional storage that reduced needless lifting and handling and increased visibility and access.

Source: Heiner, Mary Koll, and Helen E. McCullough. *Functional Kitchen Storage: Bulletin 846*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, June, 1948), 24.



Figure 3.7. Coverage of the Cornell Kitchen in Popular Science stressed the relationship between the configuration and dimensions of the work center, and the housewife's body.

Source: Soule, Gardner. "New Kitchen Built to Fit Your Wife." *Popular Science*, (September 1953), 172.

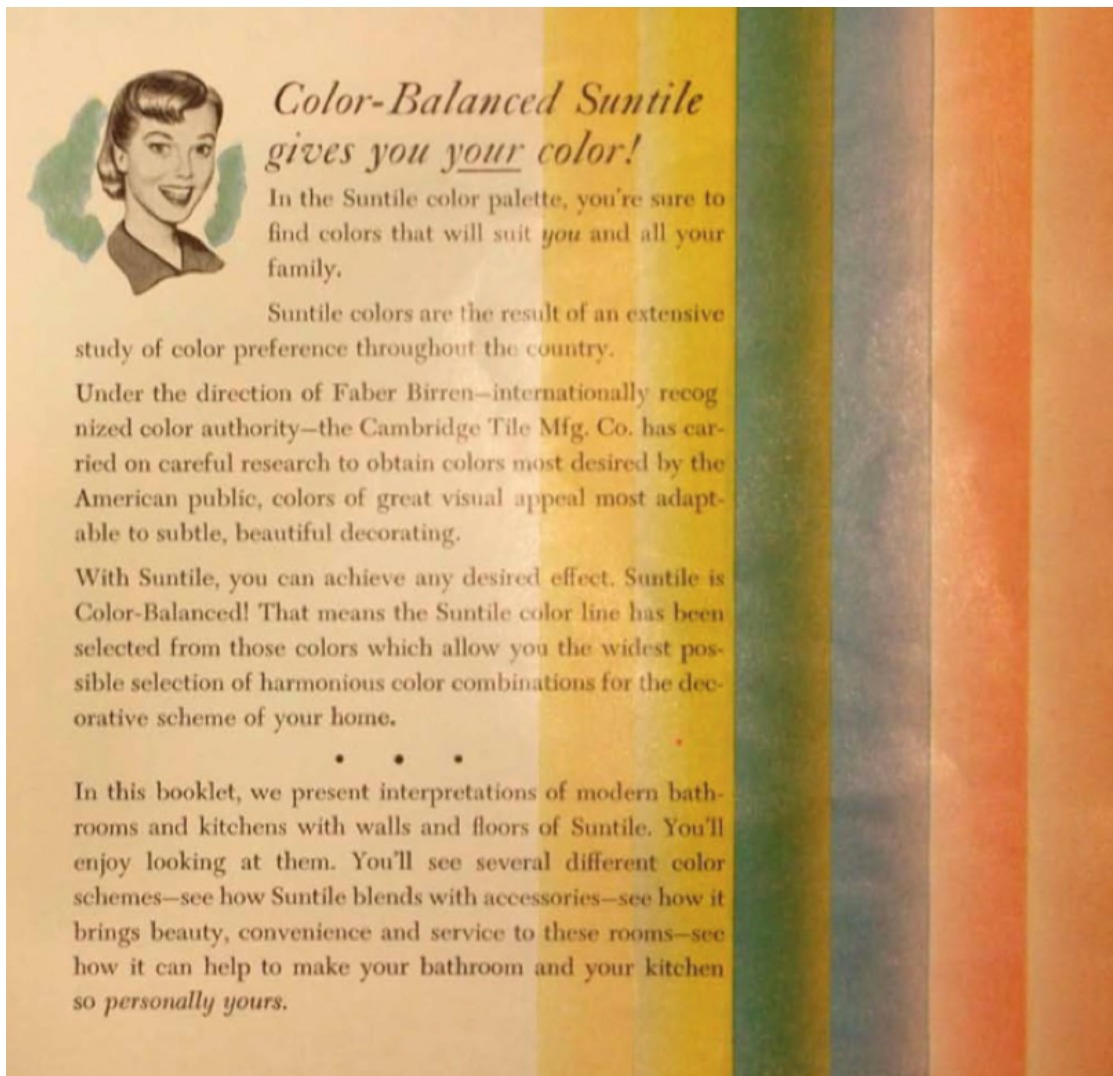


Figure 3.8. The Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Company presented color as both a highly-personal choice that was also guided by experts and national preferences.

Source: Brochure. *Personally Yours: Suntile by Cambridge* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Co., 1949) 4.

CHAPTER 4 'LOOK WHO'S DESIGNING KITCHENS':
MINIATURE PLANNING KITS AS AN AID TO PERSONALIZATION

“Happy planning...and happy living in your new kitchen.”
– Con Edison Brochure, ca. 1955.¹

A 1951 brochure from the steel cabinet manufacturer Youngstown Kitchens told housewives that "Planning your kitchen is easy, and you'll have a lot of fun doing it!"² Selecting from the company's line of prefabricated base and wall cabinets, then arranging them to fit her work habits, the amateur designer was assured a new, personalized cooking space. Similar encouragements for consumer to create their own remodeling projects were common in the rapidly expanding postwar home improvement market. A savings bank newsletter from Waycross Georgia profiled an economy-minded couple that designed their own finished attic; the article nudged other customers to likewise "Put the job on paper!"³ In Alhambra, California, a remodeling salesman described how, when visiting a prospective customer's home, he asked them for help measuring the existing room. "'And pretty soon I've drawn the customers into the act. They're helping me. Most important, as we measure, we talk. Pretty soon they're enthusiastic. They're part of the building project. They're selling

¹ *How to Get the New Kitchen You Want*. (White Plains, NY: Con Edison, ca. 1950), 14.

² Youngstown Kitchens. *The World's Newest Kitchen Ideas*. (Warren, Ohio: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, 1951), 20.

³ "It Didn't Cost Too Much," *First Federal's Home Magazine* (Waycross, Ga.: First Federal Savings and Loan Association, May, 1955).

themselves, although very likely they don't realize it” (Figure 4.1).⁴ Promoters expected amateur design pitches (like the contemporaneous do-it-yourself trend) to prompt feelings of investment in a project, to facilitate customization, and increase the chances for a signed contract.⁵

Design-it-yourself selling, however, conflicted with two other characteristics of the postwar home improvement market. Retailers were establishing in-house kitchen planning centers where a new breed of design specialist sold complete remodeling packages. At the same time, manufacturers continued to embrace mass-production and kitchen standardization that lowered the cost of steel and wood prefabricated cabinets, bringing them within the financial reach of an ever-greater number of Americans.⁶ The tensions—between encouraging customization and the realities of mass production, and between empowering the female consumer and furthering manufacture, dealer, and contractor authority through professionalization—were revealed in the ways postwar remodeling promoters deployed one selling tool in particular, the miniature kitchen planning kit. Developed in the 1920s and consisting of numerous small-scale cabinet and counter pieces arranged to represent different layouts on a gridded model

⁴ "He Lets Customers Sell Themselves...well Almost!" *Domestic Engineering* (September 1953): 97.

⁵ The paper takes on this subject from the remodeling promoter's perspective—what strategies and rhetoric did they employ and why did they believe those approaches would resonate with female customers. This is largely by necessity as I was unable to locate any primary or secondary source materials describing how housewives received miniature design kits. It is not to imply, however, that women passively accepted without question the presentation of the miniature kits as framed by manufacturers, dealers, and their advertising agencies.

⁶ Postwar home prefabricators were likewise dealing with the issue of customer individualization marketing and product development. For example, the American Houses Corporation developed a "design-it-yourself" package in which, "The home buyer uses a set of cut-outs representing bedrooms, living rooms, baths, kitchens, vestibules, stair sections and storage units to assemble his own floor plan" producing more than 140 possible floor plans. "New Look at Prefabs," *Changing Times: The Kiplinger Magazine* (March 1958): 30.

room, these kits became a centerpiece of remodeling marketing in the 1950s. Some ads and brochures presented the kits as professional generative tools to be used by the nascent kitchen design specialist. Alternately, they appeared as an inviting means to elicit consumer involvement in a home improvement project.

This chapter examines the miniature kit's conflicting representations in postwar consumer advertisements and product brochures, as well as trade magazine ads, articles, and sales manuals directed at those selling home improvement. The different roles assigned to the kits were indicative of ongoing uncertainty by an emergent industry about how to target the female buying public as well as broader shifts and instability in gender relations and design authority at play in the postwar period. The sales approaches that used the kits to encourage personalization actually concealed limited possibilities constrained by standardized product lines and entrenched gender assumptions. The miniature kitchen kit—forging narratives of creativity, individuality, and optimism at a seductively small-scale—was undoubtedly an engaging selling aid. As a generative design system it was less effective. Rather than providing distinct kitchens responsive to the owners needs and tastes it modeled homogenized spaces largely indistinguishable from others. While seeming to transfer authorship to consumers, miniature planning sets functioned to secure primary design authority with manufacturers, dealers, and contractors. The prominent role remodeling retailers ascribed to the new professional kitchen planner tempered essentialist allusions to female design aptitude that suffused design-it-yourself rhetoric. Dealer experts mediated consumer preferences and directed consumer creativity to the initial arrangement of selected cabinets and counters, choosing cabinet accessories, and what

was considered the traditionally female domain of surface decoration—counter and paint color, wallpaper and floor patterns.

Design-It-Yourself

Assertions that women were capable, even uniquely qualified, kitchen planners dated back to nineteenth-century homemaking manuals whose guidance intended to turn "every home into a small laboratory, where women could control the experiments."⁷

Domestic advisors, enamored with scientific management and working under middle-class (often nativist) assumptions, could be ambivalent about the process of kitchen personalization through user-involvement. A desire to make the kitchen responsive to the habits and body of its principle user conflicted with a desire for standardized solutions with universal applicability.⁸ At the Homemaking Experiment Station, Georgie Boynton Child came up with model plans that homemakers were expected to adapt for their own use. Child's 1914 book *The Efficient Kitchen* described efficiency as "the very antithesis of the selfish and narrow individualism that insists upon considering every problem of the home as a "personal matter." She lamented "the somewhat petty insistence on individual preferences and prejudices that often seem reared like a solid wall in the way of progress in this important field."⁹ Two years later, a publication in Cornell University's Reading Course for the Farm Home stated,

⁷ Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, 41.

⁸ Kathryn Sklar has argued that nineteenth century domestic space was the first to reconcile national and personal aspirations, to bridge independence and uniformity. According to Sklar, the pioneering domestic advisor Catharine Beecher "was among the first to engage in the contradictory task of both nationalizing and personalizing the American domestic environment. Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), xii.

⁹ Georgie Boynton Child, *The Efficient Kitchen: Definite Directions for the Planning, Arranging and Equipping of the Modern Labor-Saving Kitchen—A Practical Book for the Home-Maker* (New York: McBride, Nast & Company, 1914), 2.

“Any home maker should be able to plan a kitchen intelligently, just as she should know how to sew up a seam or balance her accounts. This does not mean a kitchen that seems convenient merely because it expresses certain pet whims, or ideas, but one that measures up to some standard tests on general essential points.”¹⁰ Lillian Gilbreth and Christine Frederick, two chief proponents of domestic science in the first half of the twentieth century, encouraged women to customize kitchen configurations to suit their own work habits, and position counters to suit their stature. But both saw kitchens as rooms that should be dedicated exclusively to food preparation; adapting them to accommodate other uses was not recommended.¹¹ For many domestic engineers, the user-housewife was to be studied en masse; her habits measured, and generalized kitchen design criteria developed from the aggregate results.

In a post-World War II era that emphasized personal fulfillment and expressions of individuality, consumer involvement in remodeling plans assumed a greater prominence. Promoters of user planning expected the housewife to bring to the process a knowledge of her work habits, her family's living habits, her own aesthetic preferences, and an innate sense of appropriate design.

Postwar American homemakers were informed and engaged shoppers. For decades, high school and college-level home economics programs had taught students

¹⁰ Helen Binkerd Young, "Planning the Home Kitchen", *The Cornell Reading Courses For the Farm Home*, no. 108 (1916).

¹¹ For a discussion of how Gilbreth encouraged individual solutions, see: Genevieve Bell and Joseph Kaye, "Designing Technology for Domestic Spaces: A Kitchen Manifesto," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2002): 49. For a discussion of Gilbreth and Frederick's opinion that kitchens should only be used for food preparation, see: Bullock, "First the Kitchen—Then the Façade," 180. Dolores Hayden characterized both Gilbreth and Frederick as antifeminist, for espousing conservative and ultimately false promises of scientific management and consumption as a means of liberation. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 285.

how to arrange kitchen work centers and to dispassionately evaluate equipment. Mass-market magazine articles, planning guides, and advertisements introduced the latest products, technologies, and trends, supplementing formal training. Customers interested in remodeling clipped from these sources images of their favored features, colors and patterns, filing them away in idea books for future reference.¹² They attended home shows and open houses in new suburban developments, completed surveys and questionnaires, inquired among friends and neighbors who had already remodeled, and visited the homes of satisfied customers, whose names and addresses were distributed by local dealers.

Postwar manufacturers and dealers regularly described new kitchen features as “housewife designed” and “homemaker approved.” In 1952, the millwork firm Curtis Companies of Clinton, Iowa boasted their wood cabinets were “designed and styled by women for women.” A Curtis brochure claimed, “There are things about a kitchen that no mere male can know. Men . . . bless them! . . . have a work week that averages 40 hours. But many housewives, surveys show, spend from 60 to 70 hours a week at household tasks, many of those hours in the kitchen. Who should know better than women what a kitchen should be?”¹³

Promotional literature argued that the housewife possessed not only invaluable

¹² Andrew Shanken spoke about this practice in an April 2003 presentation at the University of California, Berkeley, entitled “Homing Devices: Scrapbooks and House Planning in the United States, 1920-1950.” Other manufacturers used the scrapbook motif as a gendered marketing tool. See the Crane Co. advertisement discussed later in this chapter, *Domestic Engineering* (November, 1952), 227., and Hazel Dell Brown, *Ideas for Old Rooms and New”: From the Scrapbook of Hazel Dell Brown*. (Lancaster, Pa.: Armstrong Cork Co., 1944).

¹³ *Curtis Kitchens: Designed and Styled-By Women-For Women* (Clinton, Iowa: Curtis Companies, 1952), 1. Such a separation of authority and privileging of women within the “separate sphere” of the home underpinned the history of domestic advice.

empirical knowledge derived from her education, time in the kitchen, and observing her family, but an innate understanding of rational design.¹⁴ When this understanding was elicited and routed through a company's product line, it only could result in a successful, customized new kitchen. Postwar advisors did not explicitly dismiss homemakers' "pet whims or ideas" out of hand. Rather, they were incorporated into the increasingly central notion of personalization based on a woman's intrinsic awareness of her needs and tastes. A 1949 Youngstown Kitchens pamphlet assured housewives, "Don't worry because you may think you have no 'knack' for kitchen planning. You already know in your heart how you want your kitchen. Common sense will do the rest."¹⁵

United States Steel's 1955 promotional film *Practical Dreamer* reinforced this assertion of innate female design ability (Figure 4.2). In it, housewife Edie Michaelson receives a midnight visit from a disembodied steel kitchen promoter who draws her out of bed and downstairs to design her own customized kitchen. "The whole idea is to plan the kitchen the way you want it," the voice states. Edie agrees, responding, "The kitchen should fit me, not vice versa."¹⁶ Though Edie expresses repeated concerns about the overwhelming range of options and her own lack of expertise, the voice offers calm reassurance, suggesting that Edie rely on her own understanding of her family's lifestyle and her own needs as a homemaker. Intuitive ability and a few

¹⁴ Female intuition has often been put up as a means for women to survive and thrive in realms otherwise dominated by men. See, for example, the story of Barbie doll creator, Ruth Handler, in: Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 322-323.

¹⁵ Youngstown Kitchens, *How to Get Your Dream Kitchen—and Save* (Warren, Ohio: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, 1949), 19.

¹⁶ United States Steel, *Practical Dreamer*.

common-sense rules were all it took to design a functional, attractive, and unique kitchen.

The 1950s was a how-to, do-it-yourself era, in which mass-produced kits spurred new forms of creativity. Manufacturers and public health authorities presented hands-on hobbies as a productive, therapeutic use of leisure time. They kept husbands and adolescent children at home and filled the wife's time freed up by modern kitchens and appliances. Increasingly, "Commercialized crafters" bought packages that included all the materials, instructions, and often tools necessary to complete the project.¹⁷ Kits mediated the experience, simplifying processes, reducing time and labor, and giving consumers a running start that raised the chances for satisfactory results while limiting the variety found in those results. While the user could usually alter their designs along the way, the "after" image on the box provided a powerful aspirational goal. Paint-by-number packages, moccasin kits (with pre-cut, pre-tooled leather), and latch hook rug sets enabled enthusiasts to make objects of which they were proud. In a similar fashion, pre-processed convenience foods and ready-mix cake products quickly brought the homemaker to within a few steps of those dishes colorfully represented in magazines and cookbooks.¹⁸ By the end of the decade, assembling molded plastic models—of cars, airplanes, human torsos—was the nation's

¹⁷ Steven M. Gelber uses the term in *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 261.

¹⁸ Leveraging previous innovations in the areas of dehydration and flavoring, as well as new forms of packaging such as cellophane, convenience food was designed to partially complete the work for the housewife, reducing kitchen time and drudgery. Convenience foods accompanied an increase in home freezers and frozen cooked and frozen prepared foods available in super markets. "Prepared Foods Up 47 Per Cent in 1955; 35 Per Cent Increase Seen for 1956," *Quick Frozen Foods* (May 1956): 60-180. In 1956 cake mix companies were selling around 600 million packages a year, up from 360 million in 1954 and 33 million in 1947. "Ready Mixes Sweeten Dry Flavor Sales," *Chemical Week* (August 3, 1957): 78, 80.

most popular hobby.¹⁹

Handicraft packaging accompanied the rise of the do-it-yourself (DIY) trend, a national consumer phenomenon in which non-professionals contributed their sweat equity to a range of home improvement projects.²⁰ The building industry capitalized on the growing popular interest in DIY with new, easily installed materials, the refashioning of tools for consumer appeal, and a flood of instructional articles and books. DIY kits facilitated larger activities from tiling a bathroom to assembling bookshelves and precut sheds.²¹ Cultural commentators lauded DIY and DIY kits seeing them as wholly in keeping with American myths of self-reliance and individualism. Suburban critics and those who cooked, painted, and built from scratch were more critical, seeing those who used packaged hobbies as a mass of phony dabblers willingly regimented into creating homogeneous copies, not original creative expressions.²²

Alongside prompts for consumers to do it themselves using prepackaged projects, were prompts for consumers to design it themselves using prepackaged planning aids. Manufacturers encouraged consumers to develop decorative schemes

¹⁹ According to *Popular Mechanics*, \$6 million in kits were sold in 1947, climbing to \$35 million a decade later, and then exploding to an anticipated \$100 million by the end of 1960.

²⁰ For an overview of DIY and home improvement, see: Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in 20th Century America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), and Chapter 10 of: Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America*.

²¹ *Look* magazine offered a "hobby kit" bookshelf that included the necessary pre-cut lumber, nails, sandpaper, wood glue, and step-by-step instructions which promised satisfying results for "even the rankest amateur." "Look's Kit," *Modern Packaging* 22 (October 1948): 137. An all-in-one tool kit complete with coping saw, trowel, tape measure, chalk, and chalk line was marketed to help the home workman install plastic wall tile installers with professional results. "Tile Kit," *Modern Plastics* 30 (May 1953): 172.

²² Paint by number historian, Bill Bird, wrote that, "The denunciation of paint by number became a sport among social critics preoccupied with the raw edge of suburbia, where mass culture seemed most at home with the jerry-built entropy of supermarket sad hearts, tract houses, picture windows, and pink lampshades." William L. Bird, *Paint by Number* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 7.

that coordinated paint, wall coverings, and furnishings with the help of dealer-provided color guides. Linoleum manufacturer, Sloane-Blabon's "Design-A-Floor" package helped homemakers improvise floor color and pattern effects.²³ The plumbing supply company Crane set up pre-fabricated idea centers resembling drafting tables and stools and stocked with a brochure called the "Sketchbook of Ideas" at dealers throughout the country (Figure 4.3).²⁴ Design-it-yourself rhetoric focused most prominently on the kitchen. Promoters encouraged homeowners, and housewives in particular, to ensure the personalization of their remodeled kitchens by engaging intuitively, intellectually, and sensorially in the planning process. Manufacturers of prefabricated, "ready-to-install" lines of wood or steel modular cabinet and counter units led the charge. The selling tool that an increasing number of them used to articulate amateur design was the miniature planning kit.

Miniature Planning Kit Evolution

In 1929 Samuel S. Cook submitted a patent application for what was termed a "demonstration kit" on behalf of his employer, the woodwork firm Curtis Companies of Clinton Iowa (Figure 4.4).²⁵ It featured a foldable, gridded floor connected to a pair of panels that opened to form the perpendicular walls of a model room. Users were to arrange the scaled, flat cardboard doors, windows, cabinets, ovens, and refrigerators along the model walls until they were satisfied with a particular layout. Curtis

²³ "'Design A Floor' Kit Sells Floor Coverings to Amateurs," *Sales Management* 64 (May 20, 1950): 64.

²⁴ "Dealer Gets Good Remodeling Jobs Through Crane Sketchbook of Ideas," *Domestic Engineering* (November, 1952), 227.

²⁵ Samuel S. Cook. *Demonstration Set*. US Patent 1,845,240, filed June 17, 1929, and issued February 16, 1932. The patent described the invention as an "apparatus to represent a portion of a room and objects to represent articles in the room, the objects being moveable relative to the room whereby a pictorial view may be arranged in any desired form..."

developed the kit to promote a new line of sectional kitchen cabinets the firm introduced during the Depression. Foreshadowing the presentation of postwar miniature kits, the ad also suggested the set was a fun and easy way to redesign a kitchen. An amateur could, “Build your kitchen in miniature first . . . With just the units you want . . . Arranged exactly as you want them.”²⁶ The accompanying illustration, however, showed a salesman leading two female customers through a new kitchen layout using the kit. He is pitching, they are observing. The image implied that the salesman-expert did the arranging, not the customer; its blocking—salesman behind the kit, women in front—had a didactic, rather than a collaborative, connotation (Figure 4.5).

Curtis Companies filed a second patent application in 1935 for a significantly improved version of their original planning set. The primary change, the use of three-dimensional wood blocks to represent base cabinets, counters and appliances, brought the kit to maturity (Figure 4.6). The blocks modeled counter depth and provided views from multiple perspectives. Most importantly, they transformed the model equipment into replicas of the real thing. The resulting package was a more useful, realistic, and evocative tool for professional and amateur alike.²⁷

Miniature kitchen planning received widespread attention in 1937 when the nascent National Kitchen Modernizing Bureau adopted the practice as part of a new

²⁶ “First Sash and Door Factory Operated in a Barn on 7th Ave.,” Centennial Edition. *Clinton Herald*, Clinton, Iowa, June 18, 1955. Cook was director of the company by 1955., “A Kitchen That Was Built On a Library Table,” *Saturday Evening Post*, (March 22, 1930), 123.

²⁷ Pinney described his kit as a selling (rather than design) tool, stating that it was “for the purpose of more conveniently illustrating to prospective customers just how full-sized units of equipment will look in a completed installation.” Byron R. Pinney. *Miniature Demonstration Set*. US Patent 2,127,047, filed November 16, 1935, and issued August 16, 1938.

promotional campaign. The organization distributed to its members a cardboard set with four walls, a floor and die-cut units that could be folded into the three-dimensional shapes of cabinets and appliances.²⁸ NKMB-sponsored design competitions also challenged homemakers to make scale models of their planned kitchen with cardboard or other materials. Contestants were asked to submit their model along with an essay on "Why I Want a Modern Electric Kitchen." Entries were judged on how well the arrangement saved labor and (reflecting the competition's promotional intent) on its use of electrical equipment. Having the customer create their own model rather than using a standardized kit, also reflected the organization's goal of stimulating electricity and appliance consumption through general remodeling projects, not of selling a specific line of cabinets and equipment.²⁹

Within the first decade of the postwar era more than a dozen companies were using miniature demonstration kits as part of their promotional activities.³⁰ Millwork companies including Curtis and Long-Bell used the sets to market their prefabricated wood cabinet packages. Utility companies used them to promote general kitchen modernization. But the steel kitchen industry's explosive growth brought planning kits an unprecedented level of attention. Introduced prior to World War II, steel cabinets

²⁸ The NKMB was a utility and appliance trade group organized in 1934 to encourage kitchen remodeling and new kitchen design projects featuring electrification. For more information on the organization's activities, see: George E. Whitwell, "Forward with the National Kitchen Modernizing Program," *The Edison Electric Institute Bulletin* 195 (May 1937): 189-190. It is not known whether the NKMB kit was explicitly based on Kinney's patent (which the Patent Office didn't recognize until a year after the NKMB kit appeared). Cook's patent number is noted on a later General Electric miniature kitchen planning kit (though the latter used 3-D blocks rather than flat cards), photos of which are in the author's files.

²⁹ "National Kitchen Planning Contest Sponsored by Modernizing Bureau," *Edison Electrical Institute Bulletin* (May 1937): 195.

³⁰ Surviving examples of these kits occasionally appear today on the online shopping site eBay. Unfortunately, the auctions rarely include the literature and selling guides that were originally part of the kits.

dominated the complete kitchen market from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s.³¹ They were part of a larger initiative to increase consumer use of steel (cabinets) and stainless steel (sinks, countertops, housewares), or in the language of one manufacturer, to "surround her with stainless."³² In 1951, steel cabinets were said to account for over \$120 million in sales. Firms like Youngstown, Berger, and Lyon offered modular, configurable packages of base and wall cabinets featuring streamlined curves, chrome hardware, and a glistening enamel finish.³³

Kitchen kits and their individual blocks were ideally suited to represent modular, prefabricated kitchens. Full-size, mass-produced cabinet and counter lines were designed to be assembled into various configurations. All the major steel kitchen manufacturers advertised their cabinet units, and the shelves and drawers within, as mix-and-matchable. American-Standard offered an "exclusive convertibility feature" that the firm claimed allowed over nine thousand different combinations of steel base, wall, utility, and under-sink cabinets, sinks, drawers, and shelves. The Acme Steel under sink and base cabinets could "be converted at will to multi-drawer units. So

³¹ Complete steel kitchens were attractive to the consumer and to the company offering the package. The former could be quoted a single price, avoid shopping around for every detail, obtained easier, less complicated financing, and have one, accountable point of contact that they would work with throughout the process. The company could control the prices, schedule, and quality, while keeping more profit than if the job were divided among several parties.

³² The phrase comes from a Republic Steel Company advertisement: "You've Asked for a Repeat Performance...So Again in '56...November is Stainless Steel Month," *Hardware Age* (September 27, 1956): 16-17.

³³ The industry's first trade group, the Steel Kitchen Cabinet Institute was established in 1936 in Ohio. The Steel Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association established in 1951 with 19 founding members. As early as 1948 industry leader, Youngstown Kitchens had sixty factory representatives and 7500 kitchen dealers working nationwide. By the mid-1960s the overwhelming popularity of steel cabinet kitchens waned as natural-grain wood cabinets became preeminent.

simple a child can do it."³⁴

Youngstown Kitchens was especially enthusiastic, placing miniature sets prominently in product literature and advertisements directed at both retailers and consumers.³⁵ In 1948, General Electric developed the “Applianset,” a kit with 75 polystyrene models of various GE appliances, furnishings, and cabinets. Consolidated Edison Company released their “Plan Your Kitchen Kit” almost a decade later (Figure 4.7).³⁶ In the intervening years, other steel kitchen manufacturers—Lyon Metal Products, Inc., American Kitchen, Hotpoint (owned by Edison General Electric), Borg, Inc., Geneva, Universal-Rundle, Berger, and Republic Steel Kitchen—developed their own versions. Two-dimensional kits featuring paper cut-outs were cheap alternatives to these more common block-based sets. Producers such as the Murray Corporation preferred these paper versions which they could include as inserts in planning guides or brochures along with a scaled chart, template and fact sheet.³⁷

Three-dimensional miniature planning sets shared several characteristics. First,

³⁴ The modular process gave manufacturers access to lower-income families who could only afford incremental kitchen improvements. It also addressed some consumer concerns about rapid obsolescence as individual parts, sinks, base or wall cabinets could be replaced with newer versions without requiring a complete kitchen remodeling. For one example of how manufacturers presented modular systems in advertisements, see the Acme Metal Products Corp. advertisement: “Convertibility,” *Domestic Engineering* (February 1950): 185.

³⁵ “Miniature Kitchen Display,” *American Lumberman* (January 3, 1948): 52, 54. Youngstown featured the kit in advertisements aimed at contractors and retailers, which promised them access to “Exclusive planning tools for easy, accurate, three-dimensional kitchen planning.” Also see: Youngstown Kitchens. “We Can Prove It! More Advantages For You Than With Any Other Kitchen (Wood or Steel!).” Advertisement. *American Lumberman* (April 8, 1950): 438.

³⁶ “G-E Offers Miniature Appliances to Aid in Planning Kitchens,” *Fortnightly: The North American Utilities Business Magazine* 42, no. 2 (1948): 36. Other wood cabinet producers also got into the act. Long-Bell Lumber of Kansas City, Missouri, produced a set to market their Posture Perfect wood kitchen cabinets in 1951. “Kitchen Planning Kit,” *Southern Lumberman* 183 (November 1, 1951): 169. See also: “Miniature Kit Aids in Kitchen Planning,” *American Builder* (January 1, 1952): 278.

³⁷ “Help Her Buy...With These Modernization Sales Aids,” *Domestic Engineering* (November 1952): 249.

they were portable; almost all were designed to fit into custom briefcases. Salesmen could take the demountable kits outside the showroom and use them as presentation aids before women's clubs, parent-teacher association meetings, and other community gatherings. Ideally, the salesman brought it into the home of a prospective customer and set it up on the kitchen table. The scale of the kit (commonly one-inch-to-one-foot) was demarcated as a grid on the floor and occasionally walls. When the salesman correlated its dimensions to those of the full-sized room by moving or marking the kit's walls, the scale allowed for a fast and reasonably accurate means of converting a miniature design proposal into a macro one.

Advertisements and brochures commonly showed the planner-salesman presenting an arranged kit to a wife or couple (Figure 4.8). The salesman then took photos of the completed design that consumers kept for reference as the work progressed. Here the miniature setup functioned simply but effectively as a demonstration and sales aid, helping the customers to imagine a proposed project into being. Promotional imagery also showed what appeared to be architects and draftsmen incorporating the sets into their collection of design instruments.³⁸ The June 1950 cover of the trade magazine *American Lumberman* depicted a rolled-sleeved professional (identified as such by his drafting table and tools) working with a miniature kit (Figure 4.9).³⁹ The emphasis on measurement, grids, and scale in these images served an important function beyond enabling the transfer of a design from

³⁸ General Electric expected their Applianset would aid “retailers, power companies, architects, builders, financial institutions and schools in planning kitchens and laundries.” “Applianset,” *Advertising & Selling* 41, no. 9-12 (1948): 227.

³⁹ “Package Kitchens Are Big Business,” *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): Cover.

small to full-size. Evoking the engineer's graph paper and the architect's hash-marked drafting scale, these symbols of precision suggested the miniature kit was a serious tool while deemphasizing any resemblance to children's playthings.

Advertisements and surviving sales literature indicate that some manufacturers saw the kit's function extending beyond that of a visualization tool or design instrument (Figure 4.10). A growing number of presentations following the war urged prospects to generate their own remodeled kitchen layout using a miniature planning set.⁴⁰ Descriptions emphasized the kit's decidedly gendered appeal; in illustrations, the female customer touched and arranged the blocks herself (Figure 4.11).⁴¹ Printed manuals encouraged salesmen to encourage female customers to compose and reconfigure the parts on their own, to experiment and, essentially, to play.⁴² Consolidated Edison assured potential customers that "Planning your kitchen is simple and it's fun."⁴³ A 1950 Berger brochure exclaimed, "It's thrilling-pre-assembling your new kitchen in miniature. Your Berger Dealer measures your kitchen and scales the area. You set windows, doors, appliances in place. Now you fit in plastic models of Berger

⁴⁰ In addition to the Curtis example mentioned earlier, Youngstown Kitchens first advertising campaign, initiated immediately before the US entered World War II, told consumers to "Plan your own kitchen by the YPS [Youngstown Pressed Steel] Min-a-Kit-Method." William W. Suitt, "Black and White, with Simple Message," *Printers' Ink* 197 (November 28, 1941): 19.

⁴¹ "Kitchen Planning Kit," *Southern Lumberman* (November 1, 1951): 169. The trade magazine article announcing the Long-Bell Posture-Perfect planning kit incorporated both generative and representational functions of the kit in their description, "Applying the three-inch module, scaled down, the housewife may easily plan the work areas of her kitchen and obtain a miniature picture of the finished room."

⁴² See, for example: "Kitchen Sales Are Profit Sales: Capitalize on the Kitchen Market," *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): 48-49, where the housewife arranges the pieces as husband and salesman look on.

⁴³ *How to Get the New Kitchen You Want* (New York: Consolidated Edison, 1958): 2.

Cabinets and see your kitchen . . . just as you've created it!"⁴⁴ Manufacturers who used two-dimensional kits presented them in similar ways. A trade magazine article about selling aids showed a housewife prone on the carpet planning her kitchen with a Murray template kit. The amateur designer, posed informally like a magazine browsing-teen, showed that the activity was easy and enjoyable (Figure 4.12).⁴⁵

Miniature planning sets, with the lightness and informality of a toy, provided non-threatening entry into the world of design. They required no skill to express perspective or scale. Manufacturers showed them as casual playthings, able to reveal and focus the housewife's intrinsic understanding of good kitchen design. The kits also worked to intentionally channel the amateur designer's preferences toward specific decisions and products. Throughout the process, aspirational brochure imagery (representing ideal, well-planned kitchens) and the model pieces that corresponded to real counters, appliances, and accessories closed down rather than opened creative opportunities.⁴⁶

A Miniature Kit in Action

Remodeling promoters considered miniature design kits effective sales tools in part because they could be touched. "Fingertip selling" was a postwar retailing axiom, seen in the dealer's switch to self-service and the growing reliance on product samples, full-

⁴⁴ Berger Manufacturing Division, *Planning Your Kitchen Is Fun!* (Canton, Ohio: Republic Steel Corporation, 1950), 1.

⁴⁵ "Help Her to Buy... With These Modernization Sales Aids," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1952): 249. American Central Manufacturing Corporation produced another two-dimensional set called the "plan-a-kit." See: "The Kit Hit," *Sales Management* (September 20, 1954): 40-41.

⁴⁶ This distinguished the ready-made miniature kits from earlier homemade planning kits promoted by the NKMB.

size store models, and a range of other sensorial-based marketing initiatives.⁴⁷ By touching samples and displays customers became familiar with new materials, assured that steel cabinet edges were not sharp, that a wall panel was durable, or that a carpet was non-abrasive. While handling miniature plastic kitchen units did not impart sensory information about their full-sized counterparts, in some ways the model's advantage was even greater. Arranging the blocks into an individualized composition got customers thinking of the design as a product of their own imagining.

To show how manufacturers and retailers trained salesmen to parlay this tactile engagement into sales, it is useful to examine the selling instructions that accompanied one miniature set, for Republic Steel Kitchens. Produced around 1955, the briefcase kit contained a pressed-board floor and wall system, seventy plastic cabinet and appliance pieces, a supply of brochures, catalogs, Formica counter samples, steel "bending strips" (for demonstrating the strength of the enamel finish), tape measure, stencil templates, planning forms, and the selling guide (Figure 4.13). Republic promised that when used according to the step-by-step instructions provided, the kit could transform any salesman into a "kitchen planning expert."⁴⁸

Setting up the pitch, the guide began: "So, you are seated at the kitchen table,

⁴⁷ This attention to touch was seen in all areas of store design, from the prominent use of samples and tactile demonstrations to the intentional placement of price tags on each individual item. The latter practice required customers to pick up things up to see its cost. Store designers found that when items were picked up they were less likely to be put down. New store design features attuned to the sensorium were frequently discussed in gendered terms, as changes made to attract women shoppers. See: "180,000 Potential Customers," *Hardware Age* (January 20, 1955): 106.

⁴⁸ The author obtained an example of the Republic Steel set in a 2010 eBay auction. The kit briefcase still contained all of its original components and some product literature. The sales training discussed in the text above was included in the back of the kit's display easel brochure, but was not meant for viewing by the customer. See *For Yourself How Easy It Is to Plan a New Republic Steel Kitchen* (Canton, Ohio: Republic Steel Kitchens, ca. 1955).

your planner kit is placed on it, right side up, and unopened. Leave it that way for a few minutes while you let the prospect talk." The salesman prompted the prospect (assumed to be a woman in both text and images) to identify the flaws in her existing kitchen. Then, using the kit's illustrated display easel, he introduced the company's line of steel cabinets as the "ideal answer to her needs and hankerings." At last the salesman revealed the miniature kitchen set. While obtaining more accurate measurements of the existing kitchen space, he invited the prospect to "make her own selection of various units from the neat arrangement in the kit, and to place them as she desires" (Figure 4.14). This gave her an opportunity to do some 'trial planning', and gets her deciding 'which'—not 'if.' The salesman gently evaluated her initial design efforts and proposed modifications. ("Has she made full use of corner space by using corner wall and counter cabinets?") When they arrived at a final layout, the salesman transferred the design to a planning form, tracing the position of each cabinet on the graph paper using a template with scaled cut-outs. He then attached the form to a contract and closed the sale. If the wife was unable make the decision alone, the salesman scheduled a follow up appointment when her husband could also be present.

Instructions for the return call revealed the different manner in which salesmen were expected to approach male versus female customers. Unless the husband signed off on the design without question, the salesman was to start a new presentation, lingering on issues of quality and durability. Under no circumstances was the wife to reiterate his original sales pitch, which emphasized points considered persuasive to female rather than to male customers. The scenario continued noting that the husband "may want to 'get into the act' and make a last-minute 'improvement' in the plan. Let

him but, before you plunge headlong into a trap, first wait for the reaction of his wife to this change. If she goes along with it, and it's a sound idea, all well and good." If the salesman sensed an impending conflict, he was to find a diplomatic solution: "button it up quickly and 'change the subject.'"

Republic's scripted presentation assumed the clear distinctions between the purchasing motivations of women versus men that were discussed in the previous chapter.⁴⁹ Such essentialist attitudes were common among postwar remodeling promoters and indeed consumer marketing in general. Above all, there was the expectation that female prospects responded to appeals centering upon intangible values. The new kitchen would match her personality and her family's lifestyle. It would make her feel good. Implicit was the assurance that, by committing to such a purchase, the housewife was fulfilling her maternal responsibilities, enhancing the lives of her family through care and improvement of the home. In contrast the husband, equal parts petulant and prudent, required stroking with concrete talk of details and economics. As breadwinner, his familial obligation was to ensure that

⁴⁹ Motivational psychologist Ernest Dichter theorized that women had emotional attachments to old sinks and other dated kitchen features that made them reluctant to upgrade. Conversely, men were more receptive to changes pitched as technological improvements. "Of all the accouterments, furnishings and products contained in the home, husbands, we have found, usually gravitate in their interest toward new appliances and 'gadgets'" Dichter saw women's actions driven by "symbolic meaning," men's by a "pattern of modernity." Ernest Dichter, *Proposal for a Motivational Research Study of the Sales and Advertising Problems of Youngstown Steel Kitchens and Youngstown Cabinet Sinks* (Croton-on-Hudson, NY: Institute for Motivational Research, Inc., May, 1956), 22.

In 1955 the Cornell University Housing Research Center conducted a survey of Buffalo, New York residents to assess their home buying attitudes and aspirations. The resulting publication, *Houses are for People*, included a chapter on the different housing priorities of male and female respondents. According to the survey, men were concerned primarily with price and payments, construction features, heating systems and the garage. Women were interested in eating space, the size and arrangement of bedrooms, and noise. Both husbands and wives overwhelmingly agreed on one issue, neither wanted their teenager's bedroom located near their own. Glenn H. Beyer, Thomas W. Mackesey, and James E. Montgomery. *Houses Are for People: A Study of Home Buyer Motivations*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Housing Research Center, 1955).

financial resources were spent wisely, and to check, when necessary, the more impulsive buying habits of his spouse. Because women supposedly responded to emotional pitches, remodeling promoters widely agreed that it was best to first sell to the wife, who, enamored with the potential purchase could then persuade her spouse. As the *American Lumberman* told dealers, "She is actually your best salesman."⁵⁰

Miniatures and Models

Republic's recommended pitch assumed that a human fascination for the diminutive lent the kits a special allure. Swift's Lilliput, flea circuses, and portrait miniatures deployed shifts in scale to prompt reconsideration and concentrate attention. Traveling salesman and peddlers carried in their trunks scaled-down samples of the stoves, bathtubs, and sinks they sold door-to-door.⁵¹ Model objects invite play and facilitate invention. They bring optimistic visions of the future within reach. Corporations recognized the miniature's power to normalize new products, consumption practices, and ways of thinking. Norman Bel Geddes' acre-size Futurama, designed for General Motors and exhibited at the 1939 New York World's Fair was among the most impressive examples. Featuring half a million individual buildings arranged around an automated highway system, Futurama offered a life-like representation of postwar

⁵⁰ "The Consumer Sales Clincher", *American Lumberman* (Sept. 10, 1949): 84.

⁵¹ These three-dimensional samples used since the 1800s may have had a direct influence on the invention of the miniature planning kit. Timothy Spears has argued the importance of these diminutive representations and their power to seduce consumers. According to Spears, "Nothing could replace the goods themselves—except samples, which salesman carried from place to place. Traveling salesmen continually emphasized the importance of persuading merchants to look at samples, particularly because recalcitrant customers often decided to buy after viewing them." Cases and the samples once contained within can occasionally still be found on eBay. Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 89.

high-tech utopia.⁵² A few years later, industrial designer Jean Otis Reinecke developed a plastic model for the Durez Plastics and Chemicals Company to demonstrate the potential for full-size plastic kitchens when the war came to a close.⁵³ In the 1950s, the largest model toy company, Revell, teamed up with Westinghouse to produce an atomic electrical generator station kit intended to demystify nuclear power and make Westinghouse's name "synonymous with atomic energy."⁵⁴

Two types of miniature representation weave their way through the history of building and remodeling—the dollhouse and the physical architectural model. Dollhouses have long been considered toys for girls to pretend and practice domesticity. Their emphasis on interiority suggests a bound space of control and perfection. Postwar manufacturers, advertisers, and educators co-opted this dollhouse imagery and used it as a bridge between childhood and adulthood, signaling the girl's dreams made real, and reinforcing the housewife's role as home improvement initiator (Figure 4.15). In 1954, toy manufacturer Walter L. Herene Company, produced the "home decorator kit" for girls up to age 14. The package included a miniature room in which users could mix and match the included selections of paint, wallpaper, furniture fabric, drapes and carpeting. Blending play and consumption, actual furnishings

⁵² Adnan Morshed has examined how Futurama relied on a visual culture that was increasingly attuned to the aerial perspective. While this "airplane eye" view would seem to suggest detachment between observer and object, Morshed argues that the framing of Futurama encouraged an "active, participatory spectatorship." Adnan Morshed, "The Aesthetics of Ascension in Norman Bel Geddes's Futurama," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63, no. 1 (March 2004): 74-99.

⁵³ Reinecke's model kitchen, with appliances, range and oven integrated into seamless white cabinets and counters, resembled another the streamlined integrated appliances of the Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Company's 1944 Kitchen of Tomorrow, designed by H. Albert Creston Doner. The Reinecke model was exhibited at the Walker Art Center's Everyday Art Gallery in 1946. A photo showing a housewife manipulating the model was featured on the cover of the 2011 MoMA exhibit, *Counter Space*. Kinchin and O'Connor, *Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen*.

⁵⁴ "Let Kids Build Your Corporate Image," *Sales Management* (May 20, 1960): 37.

manufacturers provided the sample materials and *House & Garden* magazine chose the colors.⁵⁵ Chemical New York likened toy kitchens with remodeled ones in a 1950s television advertisement for the bank's home improvement loans (Figure 4.16). In the opening shot of the commercial a young girl plays with the diminutive stove of a dollhouse kitchen.⁵⁶ As the image cross-dissolves into a full-size kitchen with full-size housewife, the narrator asks "Is your daughter's toy kitchen more modern than yours?" Though seeming to draw a distinction between the housewife's needs and those of her child, it is done not through contrast but through association. The almost imperceptible fading of play kitchen into a remodeled one suggests that the roots of the latter lie in the former, and further, that changes to the real kitchen could be no more complicated than the playful rearrangement of the toy. These presentations line up the dollhouse and amateur design along a recursive path leading (promoters hoped) to the consumption of home improvement by the adult woman.

The physical architectural model has for centuries helped designers work through creative challenges, communicate concepts to building teams and convince patrons and clients to accept proposals. Historically, it was coded as masculine by its craft production and use in a male-dominated profession. While serving different functions and different users than the dollhouse, it too relies upon the captivating power of diminution. Mark Morris writes that the architectural model makes complex ideas digestible, it eases apprehension about the unknown, it suggests an object whose

⁵⁵ "The Kit Hit," *Sales Management* (September 20, 1954): 40. For girls in the next age bracket up, national 4-H home improvement competitions included teenage contestant-designed miniature living rooms.

⁵⁶ *Chemical Bank Home Improvement Loan*. Video. <http://archive.org/details/dmbb07521>. Accessed on May 12, 2012.

construction is already underway, and it provides a pleasurable jolt that is at once mental and emotional. He calls the delight we feel in the rapid understanding of a model's totality "spring loaded comprehension, the intellectual 'buzz' which cashes out as an immediate aesthetic experience."⁵⁷

Miniature planning kits, like architectural models, could be disarming, reduce uncertainty about a costly investment, and allow experimentation with little expense and no risk. Also like architectural models, miniature planning kits were used not just to demonstrate a final concept to a client, but in the composition and evolution of a concept. Again, like the architectural model, planning sets could represent both process and result. One manufacturer claimed that with their kit, "you can arrange and rearrange all you want until you have the snuggest, best-looking, most compact kitchen possible."⁵⁸

As a means of measurement, correlation and experimentation, the miniature planning kit conflated two types of architectural model identified by Albert Smith.⁵⁹ The kit was like what Smith called the "architectural reference standard model" that alluded to "established rules against which to measure." The kit was also similar to Smith's "architectural scale model machine" that served as a mechanism for testing ideas, "a device on which to project thoughts in an attempt to develop the perfect design." Like plastic model cars, miniature kitchen planning kits constricted the range of experimentation (Figure 4.17). Amateur kit users didn't start with card stock, x-acto

⁵⁷ Mark Morris, *Models: Architecture and the Miniature* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Academic, 2006), 11.

⁵⁸ Youngstown Kitchens, *How to Get Your Dream Kitchen—and Save* (Warren, OH: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, 1949), 18.

⁵⁹ Albert C. Smith, *Architectural Model As Machine: A New View of Models From Antiquity to the Present Day*, (Burlington, MA: Architectural Press, 2004), 12.

knives and glue, but worked within the right angle walls and with the stock items included in the kit.⁶⁰ In Smith's language, the system was "overgoverned." Nevertheless, promoters intended the act of composition and the view of the completed work to impart a pleasurable feeling of progress, control, and ownership. Feelings that were meant to entice and seduce the kit's user.⁶¹

The level of detail depicted in the blocks, wall, and floors heightened the planning set's allure. Those made of cast aluminum or plastic (as opposed to wood) were especially fine representations of the full-size equipment. Lyon Metal Manufacturing's kit, for example, had appliance dials and controls, sink drains, wallpaper and flooring all rendered with great attention to texture and detail (Figure 4.18). Hotpoint's set won the 1945 Scale Models Award in the Seventh Modern Plastics Competition primarily because of the realistic way it rendered "cabinet door and drawer handles, faucets on sinks, and heating units on ranges, the latter simulated by printed pieces glued in place. Detail attention [was] carried even to the miniature windows which are provided with vinyl curtains."⁶²

⁶⁰ Such limitations correlated directly to the limitations embodied in full-size, mass-produced lines of cabinets and kitchen equipment.

⁶¹ Cited in: Morris, *Models: Architecture and the Miniature*, 16. The seductive wonder of a model and its ability to represent a proposed design as a work already in progress, somehow further along and closer to perfection than that drafted on paper or outlined on a spec sheet, was certainly part of its appeal as a selling tool. But it could also be a liability for the customer. The Renaissance architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti, warned that detailed models "charming the eye and striking the fancy of the beholder" have the capacity to divert the designer "from a rigorous examination of the parts which he ought to make, and to draw him into admiration of himself." While Alberti's admonition was directed toward architects too enamored with their own model to see its underlying flaws, it could also apply to the customer drawn to their creation of arranged miniature plastic counters and appliances. Did the miniature kit as sales tool count on this tendency?

⁶² "Scale Models Award: To Hotpoint, Inc.," *Modern Plastics* 26 (September 1945): 159. The award announcement notes, "The company started its planning kit program using wooden models which were found unsatisfactory. The fabricated plastics units have white acrylic shells, black bases, and red work surfaces."

Steven Millhauser writes that such fastidiousness is essential to the entrancing nature of any small-scale object. According to Millhauser, "The miniature strives toward the ideal of total imitation. The more precise, the more wonder-compelling."⁶³ Successful imitation was a primary explanation for the widespread popularity of postwar plastic model cars and other kits. The president of Monogram Models, claimed that detail and accuracy (achieved through advances in injection molding technology and polystyrene in this case) made it acceptable for adults to work with models. "Authenticity is what has made models more than kids stuff. Because reasonable facsimiles no longer are acceptable, we carry our efforts to attain detail to a necessary extreme."⁶⁴ The minutia of the kitchen design kit's meticulously replicated counter and floor patterns, handles and trim, heightened the model's sense of veracity, the visceral connection between model and user, and the planner's Brobdingnagian authority.

Purity also lent the miniature its peculiar allure. Proposed kitchen designs arrived at through the planning kits were flawless idealized representations, their perfection confirmed by the planner's control and uncompromised by occupancy. Susan Stewart relates the pure character of miniature objects to the ways we create memories and understand individual and collective pasts. She writes, "The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and

⁶³ Steven Millhauser, "The Fascination of the Miniature," *Grand Street* 2, no. 4 (Summer 1983): 132.

⁶⁴ Carson Kerr, "Modelmakers in a Tizzy," *Popular Mechanics* 114, no. 6 (December 1960): 83.

protected from contamination.”⁶⁵ Pure miniature kitchen layouts were unsullied by all of the realities of daily life—unhelpful spouses, tiring children, stifling routine and gendered expectations, dents, cigarette burns on countertops. The idealized remodeling represented in the miniature kitchen layout served as a proxy for the transformational promise of the remodeling itself.

Customization

Remodeling provided substantive gains to postwar homeowners, especially those whose existing spaces had not been updated in decades. Factory production of modular kitchens opened up the possibility of a renewed kitchen to a vast swath of the American population. Seamless installations and enameled finishes did reduce the spaces where dirt and grime could settle. Though the time saving, labor saving claims of their promoters were often overstated, modern appliances did ease kitchen drudgery.⁶⁶ Housewives who bought steel kitchens motivated partially by a desire to match those in new homes and television commercials could look with satisfaction on the same installations in their homes. And many customers were undoubtedly pleased with their contribution to the planning process and the resulting form their kitchens assumed.

The degree to which the manufacturer's product lines and selling tactics fulfilled their promise of providing a personalized kitchen at mass production prices is debatable. One is struck by how, when examined as a group, the examples of complete

⁶⁵ Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984), 56.

⁶⁶ On the tendency for new technologies and home improvements to increase rather than reduce women's domestic labors, see: Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

kitchen configurations shown in catalogs, brochures, advertisements and pamphlets during the first decade and a half of the postwar period look similar. Manufacturers' claims of thousands of possible combinations were subsumed in imagery that emphasized uniformity rather than variety. Steel cabinets were an example of what Barry Brummett called "mechtech," a functionalist, machine aesthetic that dominated architecture and the arts for much of the twentieth century. As with other mechtech objects, designers intended that cabinets be perceived as designed objects, "geometric, oiled, metallic, and functional." Reflecting an aesthetic of production, steel cabinets and counters celebrated a precise invariability. Although by the mid-1950s, manufacturers were making cabinets in a variety of hues, white cabinets remained the primary type marketed and sold.⁶⁷ Customers could order countertops in a variety of colors, but manufacturers usually offered only one or two types of finish.⁶⁸ As was discussed in the previous chapter, the personalization that producers encouraged was actually seen less in the cabinets and their arrangement and more in the choice and combination of accessories, wall covering and flooring, the curtains above the sink, and the decorative knick-knacks displayed on the "what-not shelf."⁶⁹ A 1950 Berger

⁶⁷ When Youngstown Kitchens came out with their line of pastel Harmony Hues in the mid-1950s the market was already peaking. In the second half of the decade, Youngstown, Republic and others recognized consumer demand for greater variety and a reduced public interest in enameled steel finishes (precipitated, in part, by the rising cost of steel). Starting in 1956, Youngstown offered a line of steel cabinets with a hardwood doors called the Monterey.

⁶⁸ At the time, the range of countertop materials included stainless steel, ceramic tile, porcelain-enameled iron or steel, compressed wood fiber, marble, treated or plain hardwood, Monel metal, linoleum, and rigid plastics such as Formica or Panelyte. "Which Counter Top Is Right for Your Kitchen?" *Consumers' Research Bulletin* 33 (May 1954): 14-18.

⁶⁹ As with the purchase of a car, customers could add accessories to the steel kitchen package for an extra fee. Flour bins, metal bread boxes set into a base cabinet drawer, in-sink waste disposer units, and other options could all be ordered to "customize" the design. "Choose away to your heart's content," advised one Youngstown kitchen brochure. Youngstown Kitchens. *Dream Kitchens for a Song* (Warren, Ohio: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation), 7.

Steel brochure encouraged the use of bright colors in the kitchen but, since their cabinets were only available in white, specified that use "on floors and walls...in your window treatment, curtains, cornices, blinds...on your table."⁷⁰

Established notions of sound kitchen planning repeated in prefabricated kitchen brochures and design-it-yourself guides further hemmed in amateur designers attempting to rework existing kitchens. Arrangements depicted in ads and brochures generally followed what had become efficient planning gospel by that time: the division of the kitchen into work centers (most commonly, sink, cooking, and storage).⁷¹ The expectation that plans would be based on an organization of work centers appeared unanimous and inviolable. Experts also agreed that sinks should be placed below windows, and counters where meals receive finishing touches should be placed closest to the dinner table. If window or door openings were not relocated, the placement of other features often seemed predetermined.⁷²

It was disingenuous for steel cabinet manufacturers such as Youngstown and Republic to claim their complete kitchens responded to the shifting lifestyles of American families while dismissing those modifications that seemed most able to

⁷⁰ *Planning Your Kitchen is Fun!* (Canton, Ohio: Republic Steel Corporation, 1950), 2.

⁷¹ Variations included a "mix center," and a "serving center, the last stop before the table." "'Let's Remodel the Kitchen.' What's Involved, How to Proceed, What It Will Cost," *Changing Times: The Kiplinger Magazine* 11, no. 12 (December 1957): 26-29. According to *American Builder*, "The arrangement of good kitchens is no longer left to chance. Good kitchen planning standards have been developed to meet today's exacting demands." Taylor, "New Builder Profits From Kitchen Modernization," 114.

⁷² One planning guide noted, "Especially in kitchens that are being remodeled, the plumbing, the chimney, and the doors and windows tend to restrict and determine the location of the major pieces of equipment." Mary Koll Heiner and Rose E. Steidl, *Guide for Arrangement of Urban Family Kitchens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, 1951), 41. A Youngstown brochure stated, "You may want your sink under a window, or maybe not. It is particularly desirable when remodeling an old kitchen to place the new Cabinet Sink so that existing can be used, unless this location is not convenient to other units." Youngstown Kitchens, *The World's Newest Kitchen Ideas* (Warren, OH: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, 1951), 20.

address those shifts.⁷³ Numerous consumer studies from the period document the American family's desire for a more open and multi-functional kitchen space.⁷⁴ A 1954 *Popular Mechanics* housing survey found that almost 60 percent of respondents wanted an open plan interior, and almost 70 percent wanted a kitchen with a breakfast area.⁷⁵ As families increasingly considered the kitchen a combined cooking-living room where kids did homework and Dads read the evening paper, and as these families sought ways to integrate the room (and its primary occupant) with the rest of the home, ready-to-install kitchen manufacturers had little to offer.⁷⁶

Dealers and manufacturers discounted the need for structural changes when

⁷³ Previously, at least one prefabricated kitchen cabinet producer, Hoosier Manufacturing Company, had presented their cabinets as part of larger projects that re-envisioned kitchen spaces. Their 1920 competition invited submissions from architects and domestic science experts of plans for new kitchens, all of which featured Hoosier Kitchen Cabinets, and many of which called for reconfiguring the relationship between kitchen, pantry, and dining area. *The Kitchen Plan Book*. (Newcastle, Indiana: Hoosier Manufacturing Co., 1920).

⁷⁴ Wayne Whittaker, "The House You Asked for," *Popular Mechanics* (October 1954): 150. See: Miner, "Pink Kitchens for Little Boxes: The Evolution of 1950s Kitchen Design in Levittown," 256, for a discussion of the popularity of open kitchens in new postwar housing. A survey of 3,000 women who attended the 1966 Pittsburgh Home Show found that despite a trend toward increased privacy in the home, most women still preferred an integrated kitchen-dining-family room. William J. Hennessey, "3,000 Women Asked for This House," *American Builder* 88-95, no. 9 (September 1, 1966): 74. A 1955 Cornell Housing Research Center study recommended new house designs "integrate the cooking area more closely with other areas where family members may be" after a substantial portion of the housewives interviewed expressed a dislike for being cut off from other family members while cooking. The same study found that almost all of the interviewed families preferred larger kitchens in which they could eat their regular meals. When asked "When you were looking for a house . . . what were the things you really thought were important?" more than one of every eight men and women mentioned more rooms and floor area, and one of every six women, but only one of every 12 men, mentioned more or larger bedrooms. Glenn H. Beyer, Thomas W. Mackesey and James E. Montgomery, *Houses Are for People: A Study of Home Buyer Motivations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Housing Research Center, 1955), 24. For a recent analysis of how postwar kitchens became more open and connected to dining and living rooms, see Chapter 5 of Elizabeth Collins Cromley's *The Food Axis*.

⁷⁵ An article in the same issue, about remodeling an older house, described converting an 8x12-foot kitchen into a combined kitchen-breakfast room measuring almost twice that. R Kroger Williams, "Is the Old Homestead Worth Saving?" *Popular Mechanics* (October 1954): 174-175.

⁷⁶ English industrial designer John Heritage, recognized the limitations of designing a remodeled kitchen using a process that didn't consider the room in relation to its adjacent spaces. "I despair when I see manufacturers of very expensive kitchen units inviting prospective clients to trace the perimeter of their kitchen on a piece of squared paper and promising an 'ideal' kitchen scheme in return." Kate Wharton, "Hub of the Home...Kitchen Design," *Architect and Building News* 2, no. 3 (February 13, 1969): 30.

remodeling. Youngstown ads and brochures, for example, repeatedly asserted that their cabinets could be installed "without expensive alterations."⁷⁷ Lyon Metal Products told customers browsing its planning guide that, "The size and shape of your room controls kitchen design."⁷⁸ Some local dealers were uninterested in accommodating consumer interest in snack bars, breakfast nooks, pass-thrus, oven or refrigerator niches, and other changes that increased project complexity, drove up on-site costs, and lengthened the amount of time before the dealer received payment.⁷⁹

Unified prefabricated kitchens, with integrated appliances and uninterrupted lines across cabinets and work surfaces, where every utensil had its assigned (concealed) place, contradicted the notion of flexibility that was said to be a central motive for remodeling in the first place. New kitchens were supposed to be responsive and adaptable to changes in the users' lifestyles and habits, number and age of family members at home, etc. But once a complete built-in kitchen was installed, incremental change was difficult to undertake without disrupting the uniform appearance of the original arrangement. As expressions of precise mechanical reproduction, they were static and inflexible. Cabinets from one line could not be seamlessly mixed with those of another manufacturer. Though manufacturers were cooperating to standardize the dimensions of counters and large appliances, considerable variation among equipment contours, details, and color shades remained. Homeowners later wanting to alter the

⁷⁷ Youngstown Kitchens, *The World's Newest Kitchen Ideas* (Warren, Ohio: Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, November, 1951).

⁷⁸ *Planning Your Kitchen with Lyon Steel Kitchens* (Montgomery, Ill.: Lyon Metal Products, Inc., 1956), 2.

⁷⁹ Ironically, new home builders embraced open plans that blended kitchen with dining or living room not only because these layouts were popular with consumers, but also because they reduced construction costs.

look of their complete steel kitchen yet retain some degree of uniformity had few options short of replacing the lot. As a wood cabinet competitor asked, "Ever try to change the color of baked-on enamel? It's a job most home-makers would prefer not to tackle."⁸⁰

Undoubtedly some of the limitations noted above were necessitated by the financial considerations of companies seeking to reach the largest customer base possible.⁸¹ The typical kitchen remodeling budget of \$3,000 could not accommodate substantial site work and floor plan reconfiguration. One could also argue that the restrictions manufacturers imposed on consumers protected the latter from the tyranny of choice. Even when variation and personalization seemed unhindered by mass-market manufacturing considerations, such as with paint (which could be mixed at the retail outlet), color experts and national surveys tended to funnel choice. As stated earlier, studies by motivational psychologists at the time confirmed that consumers were often comfortable locating their decisions within the advice of professionals and

⁸⁰ *Curtis Kitchens: Designed and Styled-By Women-For Women*, 6. The early 1960s consumer move away from the techno-optimism of the early postwar decade and embrace of texture and hominess in the kitchen, sealed the steel cabinet's fate. For a discussion of the 1960s decline of classical machine aesthetics, see: Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric of Machine Aesthetics* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 33.

⁸¹ Although, the further manufacturers attempted to dip into lower income levels the less customization they offered. Many of the options that were said to contribute to a personalized new kitchen were only available at additional costs. Kitchen-Kraft offered a basic countertop for "medium priced homes" but a "kustomized" top for buyers who want something more distinctive." C E Bullock, "Educational Campaign Cracks Market for Infant Enterprise," *Sales Management* 61 (August 15, 1948): 124. Further, prefabricated cabinets were advertised in mass-market magazines that touted their appeal and readership among the middle class. Elizabeth Collins Cromley, saw similar difficulties with identifying modest, semi-detached New York City-area homes as expressions of individuality. Though neighborhoods of such homes exhibited a visually cacophonous appearance following decades of incremental renovation, "Most changes are executed by contractors using a standard selection of colors and materials." Cromley, "Modernizing: Or, "You Never See a Screen Door on Affluent Homes," 78.

tabulations of popular taste reported in mass-market magazines.⁸²

The range of possibilities allowed by the typical steel kitchen line was mirrored by limited options found in the miniature kit. The number of pieces the kits included (between thirty and ninety) belied the fact that most (like the full-size units they represented) were the same color, the same finish, and offered little other variety to prospective customers. Planning kits helped owners visualize the wall or corner of a remodeled kitchen, but could not represent substantial projects that involved relocating partition walls or constructing additions. The emphasis on a new counter arrangement, new cabinets and new appliances as a means of creating a personalized space reflected the commercial objectives of those firms who used the kits to prompt consumption. Cabinet manufacturers were more interested in selling prefabricated kitchen equipment in a consumer market enlarged by the affordability of their products than they were in reorganizing floor plans to fit new lifestyles.⁸³

⁸² *Proposal for a Motivational Research Study of the Sales and Advertising Problems of Youngstown Steel Kitchens and Youngstown Cabinets Sinks* (Croton-on Hudson, NY: Institute for Motivational Research, Inc., 1956).

⁸³ A similar delimiting of options was seen in cookbooks and packaged food from the period. Those that General Mills, Kraft, and other convenience food manufacturers published were filled with recipes requiring ingredients that the companies produced. *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book*, sold more than two million copies in the two years after it was first published in 1950. It is the subject of Chapter 6 in Karel Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 202-241. These cookbooks focused less on teaching women how to creatively and efficiently feed their families, and more on directing consumption—shopping, cooking, and eating—into channels defined by a manufacturers' product line. The same went for cookbook pamphlets that appliance manufacturers published. When following recipes in these books, housewives were supposed to diligently follow step-by-step instructions, and use the brand-name products specified. At the same time, however, these kits and packages intentionally downplayed the lack of creativity involved. Through careful product testing and psychological analysis, marketers determined how much work the consumer wanted to do to ensure that they felt a sense of authorship toward the final product. A well-known example is how General Mills deliberately left powdered eggs out of their cake mixes so that homemakers would have to add and blend in real eggs. In the case of postwar cookbooks, this was partly to conceal the use of prepared food and present the meal as “homemade” and “from scratch.” In describing the proscriptive nature of postwar cookbooks, Jessmyn Neuhaus wrote, “They were instructional texts, giving detailed accounts of the “correct,” gender-

Design Authority

Miniature kitchen kit promotion reveals the ongoing ambivalence the remodeling industry felt about women as primary customers and ongoing negotiations over professionalism and expertise in design. The development of architecture as a distinct (and elite) profession in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries severed many links between designing and building. With the rise of the post-World War II kitchen improvement market, local carpenters, plumbers, and other contractors saw new opportunities to reclaim this activity—not only to install the kitchen, but also to design and sell it as a complete package. Trade magazines asserted that kitchen planning was an essential product that the dealers and contractors should offer their customers. "You are not selling merchandise alone, nor even merchandise and installation together. You are selling these two plus your ideas and ingenuity and expert advice in planning the end result."⁸⁴

To claim design prerogatives, the local dealer's kitchen department with full-size models and full-service planning intended to offer in a single retail location complete remodeling packages (which consolidated all aspects and costs of the job into one product). In the kitchen department, salesman was recast as design specialist, versed in

specific way to undertake the activity of cooking. They constrained possibilities and limited meaning, within their writings." Jessmyn Neuhaus, "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology and Cookbooks in the 1950s." *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 531. Cookbook, packaged goods, and promotional materials for kits of all sorts played upon the rhetoric of creativity and customization, despite the limits imposed by mass production and a counter push for ease and efficiency.

⁸⁴ "Remodeling! The Third Dimension of Your Market," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1953): 102. The kitchen designer, Robert Olshin expressed similar sentiments in an article in the building trade magazine, *House & Home*. "It's design-not price-that wins the remodeling customer, says Olshin. She has grown impatient with the inefficiency and drabness of her old kitchen and the first thing she wants in her new one is practical and attractive features. She won't ignore price, but it comes second. Olshin advised remodelers to hire saleswomen for their kitchen business, but concedes they are hard to find." "This Man's Designs Sell Over 3,000 Kitchens a Year," *House & Home* 27 (January 1965): 77.

current planning ideas and a thorough knowledge of his employer's product line.⁸⁵ Firms with kitchen departments and professional "planners" dealing directly with the customer were less strident than manufacturers in their assurances of effortless amateur design. Cabinet producers' claims that anyone could plan a kitchen undermined the authority of these new experts and diminished the value of what they offered. At the local retail level, where it was important to cultivate repeat customers, these outlets were cautious about granting too much authority to amateurs who, if left on their own, might regret the result. Independent consumers were more inclined to undertake piecemeal renovations based on cost, rather than purchase complete remodeling projects packaged by (and to the advantage of) a dealer. Some firms also feared that overplayed hands-off approaches would scare away potential customers who lacked the confidence or inclination to participate in the design process.

The postwar kitchen salesman-planner had a schizophrenic task. On the one hand, he (and he usually was a he) offered complete planning services, deploying his knowledge and experience to suggest specific cabinets and finishes and craft an appropriate layout.⁸⁶ But he was also expected to cede a degree of professional control for the sake of a sale, inviting the housewife into a partnership of creativity and authorship, or even, when necessary, to withdraw from the process entirely. Befitting this collaborative role, the specialist-salesman learned to skillfully elicit information

⁸⁵ See: "Seven Keys to Profit...in Complete Kitchens," *Domestic Engineering* (1952): 129. The first key was to hire a kitchen specialist and give him a drafting board.

⁸⁶ It should be noted that throughout this chapter I am writing of a designer-planner in the same general terms used in remodeling literature from the period. Generally, it was a position that included, but extended beyond, trained architects, to include all manner of specialists and expert, often self-identified as such and almost always male.

from the prospect about her motives and desires, what she hated about the old kitchen and what she would love in a new one. Ultimately, of course, his primary responsibility was to channel the housewife's preferences through his company's product line and make a healthy sale.⁸⁷

It seems paradoxical that as kitchen remodelers claimed new design authority they were also relying on a sales approach that handed off some, or all, of this authority to the customer. With manufacturers declaring amateurs perfectly capable of laying out a reworked kitchen, local dealers, salesmen, and tradesmen had to navigate a narrow rhetorical space. On one hand they were creating opportunities for customer involvement and presenting such participation as an essential prerequisite for good results. On the other hand they proffered (usually at no additional cost) their own expertise at effecting the latest ideas in kitchen design. Such services aimed to convince customers of the firm's ability to achieve a successful outcome and reduce the hassles of remodeling, while at the same time shaping the project into a form most profitable to the firm. Collaboration was the stated ideal. One successful salesman advised his colleagues that new kitchen planning should be a shared endeavor between the salesman-planner and the housewife, cautioning "be sure you know when to stop talking about your ideas and start listening to the housewife's. If she wants her range on the ceiling, she probably has good reason for it. It should be her kitchen by the time

⁸⁷ Most complete kitchen remodeling projects cost between \$2,500 and \$3,000. The mark-up on steel cabinets for local dealers and contractors was substantial, hence their desire to not only install sinks or cabinets but sell entire remodeling packages.

you're through sketching and describing your proposals."⁸⁸

As the above quote indicates, true collaboration was often difficult to achieve. Much of this was due to established gender attitudes and a desire on the part of retailers to maintain control of the process. The regular presence of kitchen specialist intermediaries, as well as the descriptions within trade publications of their role in selling, suggests that on the ground, the homemaker's preferences were not accorded the same weight that they were accorded in consumer-oriented promotional literature. Pitches started with the premise that a woman's home economics education, years of kitchen experience, and her good sense were all sufficient to develop a sound kitchen plan. Pitches ended with the expert's "gentle" assessment of the proposal. In discussion after discussion of effective participatory sales techniques, presentations filled with rhetoric about ascertaining the homemaker's needs and desires and valuing her input, the last step was to review and reshape her ideas based on the salesman-planner's own opinions and expertise. Her ideas were a starting point, but they could only find final realization following mediation by those more qualified.⁸⁹

Without the mediation of design expert and salesman, the company forfeited control over how a project evolved and lost opportunities to direct consumption along the most lucrative path. With the planning expert absent, so was the chance to "sell

⁸⁸ "Add Profit to Your Business With Kitchens . . . says Fry," *Domestic Engineering* (November 1955): 175. But some planners were unable to relinquish authority to the homeowner who had to live in the remodeled kitchen. Contested issues were not just related to layout and cabinet placement but even extended to issues of personal taste. "Says one woman who has been through several aggravations and arguments of this ilk: 'I was so mad! He argued with me about everything I wanted. Even the colors.'" "How to Work with a Kitchen Planner," *House & Garden* 130 (October 1966): 270.

⁸⁹ See, for example, "Best Planning Expert for Kitchen is Your Wife—She Lives in It," *Oxnard Press-Courier*, November 28, 1958, 12. Despite the article's title, the author concedes that the wife's planning suggestions are subject to overrule by three different authorities: architect, appliance salesman, and steel cabinet dealer.

up”—a common strategy in which salesmen parlayed small improvements (a new sink or garbage disposer) into much larger, and more profitable, purchases, a complete kitchen chief among them.⁹⁰ Finding potential kitchen remodeling customers was work and competition was fierce. Once companies snagged a live prospect, they were eager to retain them. Kitchen planning departments and staff specialists were trained to keep them, by carefully balancing customer desires with the interests of the firms the specialists represented.

Conclusion

Postwar remodeling pitches reflected rhetorical themes that promoters thought would resonate most effectively with their primary audience, white, middle-class American housewives. Gender attitudes and assumptions prevalent in postwar culture prompted manufacturers to liken kitchen cabinet arrangement to the selection of clothing ensembles. Boosters promised that remodeled kitchens could fulfill dreams, alleviate physical aches and strain, free up leisure time, make their children happy, and signal their partner's appreciation. While pre-1950s remodeling rhetoric often centered upon making the kitchen an efficient workplace to ease the homemaker's daily drudgery, postwar promotions reshaped this rhetoric. The goal of the postwar kitchen remodeling was not only to increase efficiency, but to create a space that matched the housewife's tastes and lifestyle.

⁹⁰ Heavy appliances were supposedly good tools for up selling, as homeowners who purchased them were more receptive to larger remodeling campaigns. In-house experts-salesmen could not only guide decisions toward more expensive options, they could also help regulate inventory by suggesting overstocked items, as well as finding fault with items that were not in stock or carried only by competitors.

The overwhelming majority of advertising and promotional pieces that appeared during this period reinforced gender ideologies that positioned the housewife as exclusive user, even if no longer exclusive occupant, of the postwar kitchen. The focus on customization and personalization whether designed by professionals or amateurs using kits was an act of redirection. It moved aspirations and anxieties women had about being a good mother and wife into physical space. The solution to the overworked homemaker and domestic ennui was a made over kitchen.⁹¹ In 1955, at the height of the steel kitchen boom, the *Consumers' Research Bulletin* offered a lone voice that wondered, "whether women really want to spend most of their time in the kitchen no matter how attractive it is."⁹²

The contradictory presentation of miniature planning kits reflected the remodeling industry's ambivalence about amateurs (especially female ones) doing and designing their own improvements. Efforts to depict the kits as expert tools alongside the t-square and drafting table, and to use miniature kits solely for illustrating a project's final appearance to prospective customer seemed to originate in the insecurities of an emerging profession in emerging market. They asked consumers to take the kits, and the remodeling specialists who used them, seriously. But some manufacturers and dealers saw that the movement toward personalization and

⁹¹ Janet Anne Hutchison has described the antipathy earlier twentieth century feminists felt toward mass-market home magazines that focused on battle over dirt and inefficiency rather than over equality and gendered repression. Janet Anne Hutchison, *American Housing, Gender and the Better Homes Movement, 1922-1935* (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1989), 52.

⁹² "Built-in Kitchens," *Consumers' Research Bulletin* 36 (August 1955): 21-22. Here was a central conflict of kitchen design and domesticity rhetoric spanning more than a century. Beautiful, personalized kitchens were supposed to make the time spent in them more pleasurable and fulfilling, while at the same time, efficiencies and conveniences were to liberate women to escape the kitchen and engage in more rewarding, though often unarticulated, pursuits. For a detailed discussion of these tensions, see:

designing-it-yourself offered greater rewards than assertions of expertise could provide. They saw a future that belonged to the amateur.⁹³ In time, promotional campaigns carefully acknowledged (and tacitly encouraged customers to recognize) the kits' resemblance to miniature playthings and the feelings such objects engendered.

That the literature shows wives, but never husbands, manipulating the kit's pieces is telling. I would argue that this is not just a reflection of the increasing buying authority of the housewife, for wouldn't the measurements and focus on the physical characteristics of the remodeling plan as expressed by the kit attract the male consumer as he was stereotypically understood by remodeling marketers? Instead, I think the binding of women and miniature kits reveals that promoters considered the central appeal of these objects as residing in their similarity to toys and their capacity

⁹³ Design-it-yourself approaches continued to appear long after the kitchen planning briefcases fell into disuse (they disappear from promotional campaigns by the mid-1960s). Many subsequent versions used vinyl or foldable paper cut-outs in place of the three-dimensional blocks and the case. At the same time, they no longer assumed the presence of a professional kitchen planner or salesman. Printed booklets that discussed ideal counter heights, furniture clearance, and arrangement of work stations largely replaced the expert intermediary. Products like the "Plan-A-Flex Home Designer" and the "Kitchen Designer Kit" offered by *Popular Mechanics* magazine promised amateur planners the chance to preview and experiment with different kitchen layouts without needing to "master complex drawing techniques." E. F. Lindsley, "Now: Design Kits Turn You Into An 'Architect'," *Popular Science* (June 1986): 88-89. and "Remodeling Your Home? *Popular Mechanics* Can Help," Advertisement. *Popular Mechanics* (June 1989): 220.

The Swedish home furnishings giant IKEA included a "3D Planner" in the back pages of their kitchen catalog and as printable content on their website. Featuring cut-outs that can be folded into shapes corresponding to the various counter, cabinet and appliance arrangements and placed on a gridded sheet, the kit is a stripped down, smaller (36" to 1") version of the postwar kitchen kits. The company's downloadable IKEA Home Planner 3D software, offered customers an entirely digital replacement for the miniature kit. After laying out their design, customers could submit the plan online to one of the company's Home Shopping Kitchen Consultant who, "will review your plan and follow up with you to provide a complete kitchen solution that can include appliances, sink, faucet, countertop and interior fittings." "Plan Your Kitchen in 3D" IKEA Corporation, accessed June 6, 2013, http://www.ikea.com/ms/en_US/rooms_ideas/kitchen_howto/NA/plan_your_kitchen_in_3d.html#lnk-2-5

for play, and further that promoters saw both of these characteristics as appealing primarily to women (Figure 4.19). The same goes for the claim promoters repeatedly voiced in advertisements and brochures that planning, color selection, and personalization in general was fun and playful. While undeniably facile and condescending when directed exclusively at a female audience, this characterization also revealed the postwar promoter and advertiser's growing appreciation for the selling power of stories. After all, isn't play (and design, for that matter) the creation and recreation of idealized stories? Susan Stewart writes that "The toy is a physical embodiment of the fiction: it is a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative."⁹⁴ Using the kits, the female prospect was guided to create a story about their own persona, putting the blocks together in a manner that said, "This is who I am," or at least "this is who I want to be." Whether such play resulted in more efficient remodeled kitchens that were ultimately personalized and responsive to her desires remains open to question. What is certain is that the remodeling promoters who presented miniature kits as design-it-yourself devices recognized the potential for playful planning to engender in the customer a sense of authorship that furthered sales.

⁹⁴ Stewart, *On Longing*, 56.



Figure 4.1. Salesman Lou Fisher's pitch to housewives included having her assist in measuring the existing space, a first step in encouraging the customer to see themselves as active participants in remodeling the kitchen.

Source: "He Lets Customers Sell Themselves...Well Almost!" *Domestic Engineering* (Sept. 1953): 96.



Figure 4.2. In nightgown and robe, Edie Michaelson plans her remodeled kitchen prompted by a late night visit from a steel kitchen promoter.

Source: United States Steel, *Practical Dreamer* (1957).

November, 1952 DOMESTIC ENGINEERING 227

Dealer gets good remodeling jobs through Crane Sketchbook of Ideas



Walter Widmer, of Widmer Plumbing & Heating Co., Portland, Oregon, uses the Sketchbook to show a customer how her old kitchen can be made modern with a few slight changes and some new equipment.

EVEN customers who are satisfied with their present bathrooms and kitchens, begin to think about remodeling when they leaf through the new Crane Sketchbook of Ideas. And because they regard the Sketchbook as an extra service to customers, it also builds good will and prestige for the store. Dealer Walter Widmer of Portland, Oregon, puts it this way: "Once people look through the Sketchbook, they look on us as the representative of all these beautiful rooms. They also look on us as the source for good remodeling ideas. And they certainly look on us as the place to order equipment and installations!"

If you are not yet using the Sketchbook and other business-getting ideas that go with it, ask your Crane Branch or Crane Wholesaler, or talk to the Crane salesman who calls on you!

CRANE CO.

DESIGNS, STOCKS, AND INSTALLS BATHS, KITCHENS, VALVES • FITTINGS • PIPE PLUMBING AND HEATING

Figure 4.3. A salesman assists customer plan her remodeled kitchen or bath based on ideas provided by a major plumbing manufacturer. Note the inclined table and stool, evocative symbols of the professional draftsman.

Source: *Domestic Engineering* (November, 1952), 227.

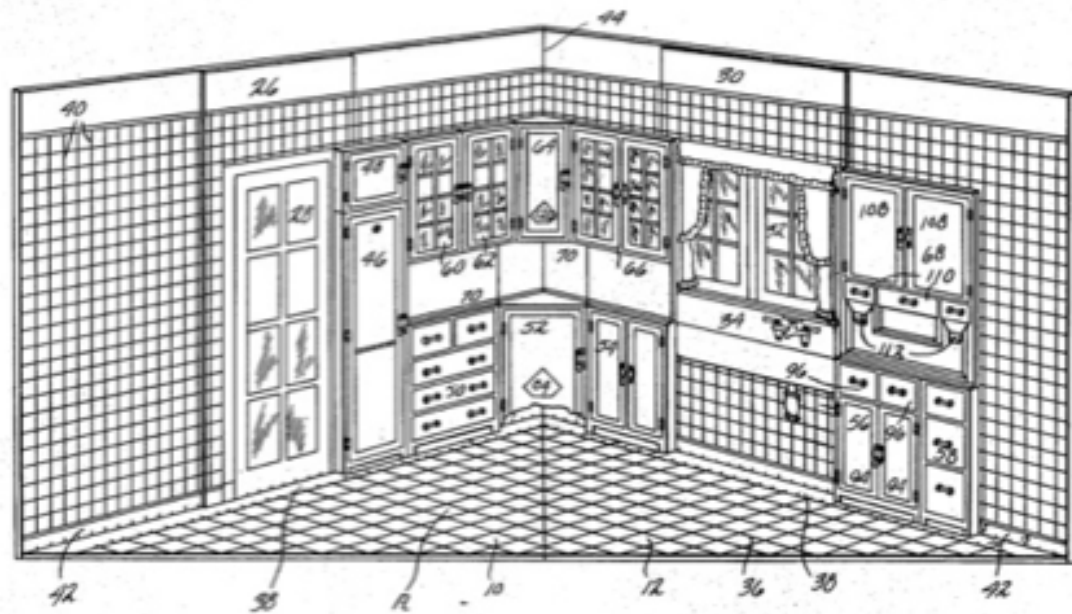


Figure 4.4. The woodwork firm Curtis Companies of Clinton, Iowa was an early promoter of miniature kitchen planning kits. An illustration from their “Demonstration Set” patent filed by Samuel Cook in 1929 and granted in 1932.

Source: Samuel S. Cook. *Demonstration Set*. US Patent 1,845,240, filed June 17, 1929, and issued February 16, 1932.

A kitchen that was built on a library table

*The new Curtis way . . . Build your kitchen in miniature first . . .
With just the units you want . . . Arranged exactly as you want them*

SHE had seen a hundred "model kitchens." Most of them, she confessed, were attractive enough. Many of them, too, had all the storage and shelf space she could use. But no one of them quite satisfied, quite came up to that dream she cherished of just how she would like to have her kitchen arranged.

Then she learned the new Curtis way to design her own kitchen—right on her library table. For all Curtis Kitchen Units in all sizes are reproduced in miniature, ready to be assembled in almost numberless combinations. With the help of our Miniature Kitchen Set you too can know that the kitchen you plan is truly practical and convenient in every detail—before a single step is taken in actual building or remodeling.

Just to give you a hint of what you can do, we have prepared an attractive, colorful booklet, "Your Dream Kitchen," showing a few of the kitchens that may be built with Curtis Kitchen Units. Mail the coupon below for your free copy.



What fun it is to plan your kitchen this way now! Shall we leave seats for pots and pans near the stove—or the sink? Where shall we put that clever broom closet, with its ironing board concealed in the door? How about some extra shelf space? And don't forget that special Curtis unit with its register, flower box and cutlery drawer that all fit downward when opened.

There's a lumber dealer near you who carries the Curtis line, and who has our Miniature Kitchen Set. Ask him to call and show you this novel way to plan kitchens, or drop in to see him. . . . Or make use of our Free Planning Service. Your coupon request for our booklet will also bring you information explaining how Our Free Planning Service can help you, at no obligation,

to bring individuality, utility and convenience to your kitchen.

The Curtis Companies Service Bureau
302 Curtis Building, Clinton, Iowa
Visit Curtis Woodwork, Inc., Display Rooms and Sales Offices, Room 205, 9 East 41st Street, New York City; Chicago Display Rooms, Curtis Door & Sash Co., 1414 South Western Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

GEORGIAN FRAMEWORK —reproduced by Curtis—

The beautiful Curtis series of historical reproductions of masterpieces of Georgian architecture and interiors includes the graceful Georgian staircases shown here and inspired by that found in the Early American Home (1770) of George Washington's estate, Mount Vernon, Virginia. Every in these reproductions of handwork—windows, doors, cupboards, etc., kitchen units—Curtis shows the same care and workmanship that you see in these painted pictures.



Curtis Companies Service Bureau
We'll send you, absolutely free, a copy of "Your Dream Kitchen," along with information explaining how our Free Planning Service can help you. (Limit one to each household.)

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____

Figure 4.5. Curtis's first iteration of the miniature planning kit serves as a salesman/designer prop as women customers look on.

Source: *Saturday Evening Post*, (March 22, 1932) 123.

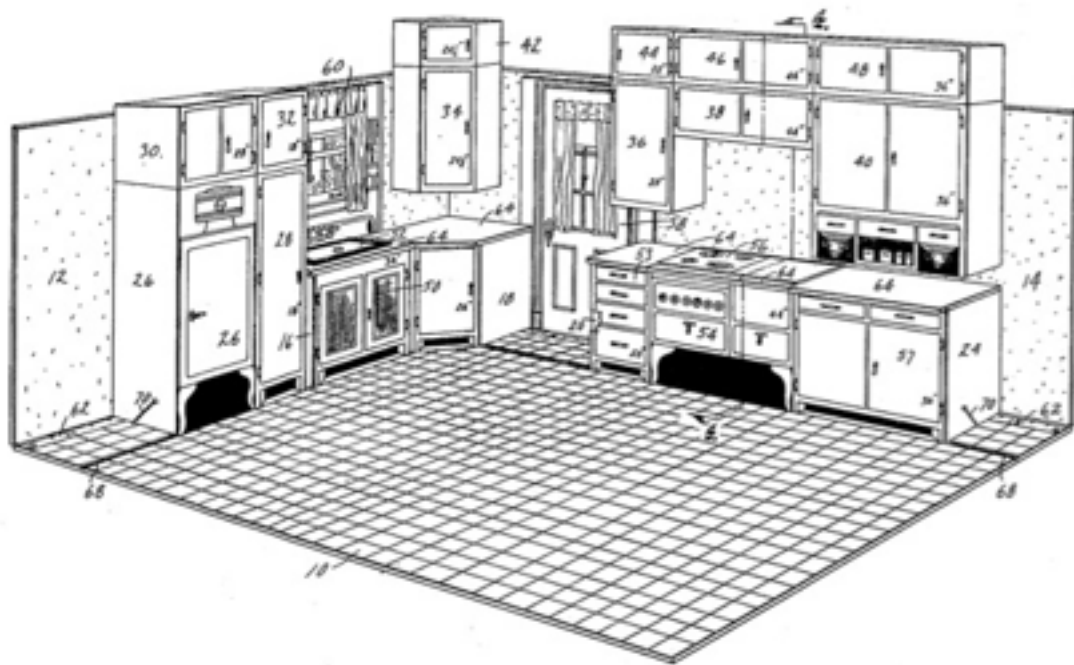


Figure 4.6. An illustration from Curtis's 1935 miniature demonstration set patent with three-dimensional blocks representing various kitchen equipment.

Source: Byron R Pinney. *Miniature Demonstration Set*. US Patent 2,127,047, filed November 16, 1935, and issued August 16, 1938.



Figure 4.7. Consolidated Edison of New York's planning kit used the bottom of a box as the model kitchen space and plastic miniatures representing various kitchen equipment

Source: Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library, London, England.



Figure 4.8. In promotional imagery, miniature design kits commonly appeared as static visualization tools salesmen and planning specialists used to suggest a completed design. Though intended as a means of clearly presenting planning ideas to the layperson, those ideas clearly originated with the expert.

Source: *How to Get Your Dream Kitchen—and Save*. (Youngstown, Ohio: Youngstown Kitchens, 1949): 18.

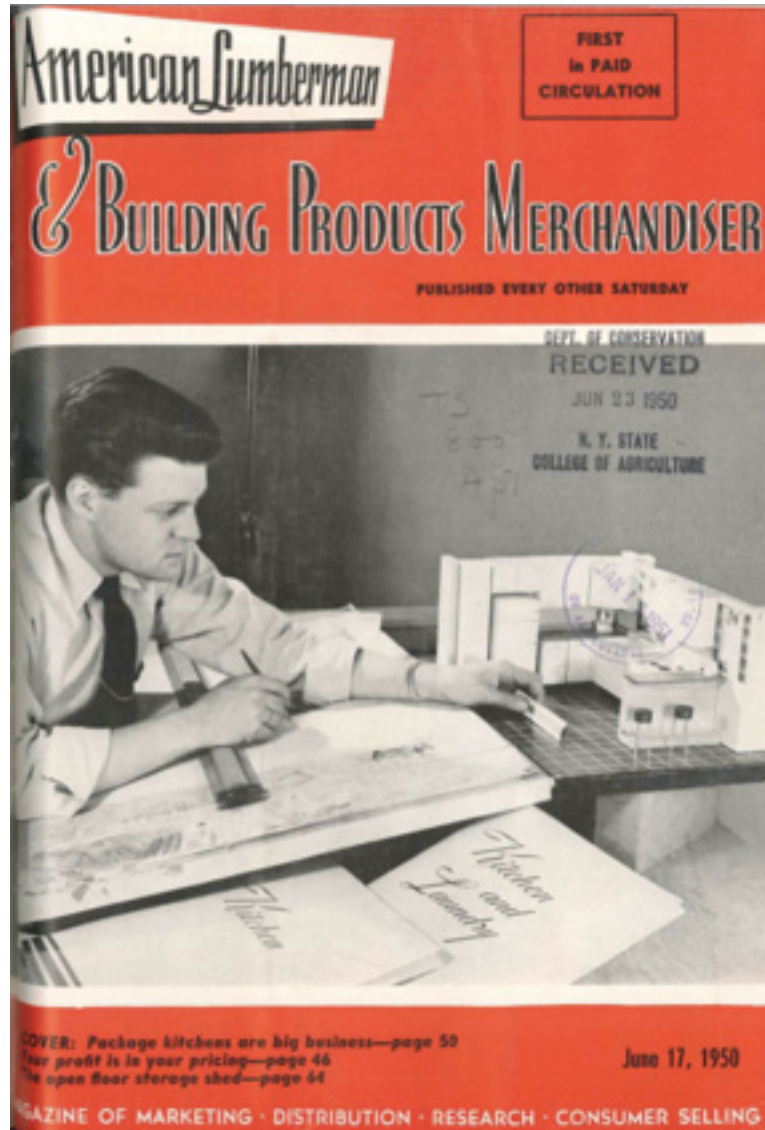


Figure 4.9. The professional designer signified by drafting table and ruler uses a miniature kitchen planning kit.

Source: Cover. *American Lumberman*, June 17, 1950.



Figure 4.10. Consolidated Edison of New York, included a booklet with their “Plan Your Kitchen Kit,” that was explicit in its assertion that the housewife could design it herself. The text claimed that “Planning your kitchen is simple and it’s fun.”

Source: *How to Get the New Kitchen You Want* (New York: Consolidated Edison, 1958): 2.



Figure 4.11. Youngstown Kitchen's brochure and design guide promises ease and enjoyment for the amateur kitchen designer. Note the lack of scale markers or other references to the technical aspects of planning.

Source: *Now You Can Plan Your Kitchen the Youngstown Way: Min-A-Kit Book*. (Youngstown, Ohio: Youngstown Kitchens, 1945).



Figure 4.12. The homemaker uses a template kit by the Murray Corp. of America to plan her new kitchen. The image suggests that planning is easy and not intimidating, while distinguishing it from professional design work.

Source: "Help Her Buy...With These Modernization Sales Aids." *Domestic Engineering* (Nov. 1952): 243.



Figure 4.13. A page from the Republic Steel display easel, set up and used by salesmen during their remodeling pitch. The image depicts some of the material included in the company's miniature planning set.

Source: *See For Yourself How Easy it is to Plan a New Republic Steel Kitchen*, (Republic Steel, 1955). Author's personal files.

Let Your Prospect "Into the Act"



Figure 4.14. Republic Steel Kitchens instructed their salesmen to step back and allow the housewife to assume a design role using a miniature kit.

Source: *See For Yourself How Easy it is to Plan a New Republic Steel Kitchen*, (Republic Steel, 1955). Author's personal files.



Figure 4.15. A 1950 advertisement for Budweiser reveals how model visions of the future were constructed along gendered lines. The man, with blueprint in hand, observes his female partner envisioning an improvement through the use of a model. The copy reads, in part, “Even after your home is built, home planning goes on forever.”

Source: *Look* magazine, January 17, 1950, back cover.



Figure 4.16. Two still images from a Chemical Bank New York television commercial showing (top) the daughter playing with her toy kitchen, which then (bottom) morphs into a full-size remodeled kitchen.

Source: *Chemical Bank Home Improvement Loan*. <http://archive.org/details/dmabb07521>. Accessed on May 12, 2012.

CUSTOMIZE IT



ANY WAY



YOU WANT!



NEW! A hobby kit from Revell that lets you design your own car.

Flare! Flare! Hood scoops! Continental kit! All these custom parts and many more—up to 14 of them—are yours in Revell's new car customizing kits. You start with one of the three basic kits—Ford, Buick, or Chrysler. But from there on, you're on your own. You plan, design, build your own custom car exactly the way you want it! You can use any number of custom parts, in any combination. Build or cut them to fit your own ideas. Use parts from one kit or either of the others. The possibilities are endless!

Win fabulous prizes for your auto design ideas! This revolutionary new swimming pool—Kather Williams' "Living Pool" that grows



Read about Revell's Car Customizing Contest in the March issue of *TEEN* Junior

with your family—in the first prize in the exciting Revell-Motor Trend Car Customizing Contest! 2nd prize: One week for two at the Statler Motor Hotel, Washington, D.C.—3rd prize: Lifetime supply of brake linings from Nationwide Safe-Brake Centers. Dozens of monthly awards! Get entry blank in any Revell customizing kit or write: Revell, Inc., Union, California



Figure 4.17. Kits and customization merge in this 1959 advertisement for Revell plastic scale-model cars. Although the kits told model-makers “You plan, design, build your own custom car exactly the way you want it!” they were limited to adding pieces to three basic models. Resulting differences are minimal.

Source: *Boy's Life* (February 1959), 11.



Figure 4.18. Lyon Steel Kitchens miniature planning kit featured precisely rendered cabinets with handles, dials, faucet, patterned flooring, and even a view out the window. Such minutiae increased the user's visceral connection to their creation; detail suggested truth and legitimacy.

Source: Author's personal files.



Figure 4.19. In the postwar era, ads and brochures often depicted miniature kits as accessible and disarming. Here, steel cabinet manufacturer Berger argued for the ease and pleasure of amateur kitchen planning by equating the miniature design kit to a child's toy. Intimidating expertise, in the form of salesman or specialist, is absent.

Source: *Planning Your Kitchen Is Fun!* (Canton, Ohio: Berger Manufacturing Division, 1950).

CHAPTER 5 DUPES AND DYNAMITERS:

HOME IMPROVEMENT FRAUD IN THE POSTWAR ERA

"This general field of business has . . . had more than its share of 'fast-buck-boys' who have had little or no interest in providing fair and honest service to the public."

— Hugh R. Jackson, President of the Better Business Bureau of New York City, 1954.¹

The con man has always lurked in the shadows of American Capitalism. They sold land and mineral claims that didn't own, forged checks, and hustled at billiards or cards. In novels and stories the grifter robs rich and poor, gullible and savvy, steals life savings and ruins reputations. In the post-World War II era, swindlers found easy marks and fast money in the field of home improvement. As journalists, consumer advocates, and investigators repeatedly pointed out, the vast majority of home improvement dealers and contractors were scrupulous business people. Any desire for locally based firms to make a quick buck through deceit was tempered by their appreciation for the satisfied customer as guarantor of future work.² But the explosive

¹ FHA Investigation - *Hearings Before the Committee on Banking and Currency - United States Senate - vol. 1* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954), 561.

² It is important to distinguish the activities of swindlers from standard, and even high-pressure, sales tactics. Legitimate dealers established in a community practiced what they called "creative selling"—persuasive marketing, contests, discount specials, and other promotions. But these dealers usually forbade salesmen to use coercive pitches on the selling floor. See: "Kitchen Sales Are Profit Sales: Czerwiec's Sells Kitchens," *American Lumberman* (June 17, 1950): 52-55. In the article, a Chicago-based kitchen remodeler noted, "High pressure methods to close a sale—regardless of a customer's desires and ability to pay—are not tolerated. But many fresh and lively ideas are used to create and attract interest in kitchens." Even those who did practice high-pressure sales were distinct from swindlers, as the latter practiced more than just occasional misrepresentation. Swindlers had no intention of providing the good or service agreed upon. They obtained signatures through false pretenses or forgery, falsified documents, and knowingly and intentionally committed criminal fraud.

nation-wide increase in residential remodeling investment during this period, the scent of all the money Americans were able and willing to spend upgrading their homes drew the shady operator into the market. In the words of one consumer advocate, "They go where the easy money is."³ With time-tested rackets leavened by novel materials and appeals, scammers found almost limitless opportunities to dupe and deceive. In 1956, the *Saturday Evening Post* claimed that, "if you own a home there is a strong possibility that you have been hooked recently by the "suede-shoe boys," a new species of racketeer who makes the old-time bunko artists look like amiable amateurs."⁴

Throughout the period, the Association of Better Business Bureaus consistently and by a wide margin, ranked home improvement scamming as the number one area of consumer fraud.⁵ Hugh Jackson, president of the Better Business Bureau of New York City, estimated in 1954 that in the metropolitan area over the preceding two years \$50 million worth of home improvement work was done in which

A criminal investigation manual elaborated on the definition of criminal fraud vs. a civil dispute that might result from a dealer and customer disagreeing about the deal's details. "There is often a fine line separating civil disputes that are not Bunco cases from criminal fraud. The difference lies in the intent of the suspect. For example, if "A" sells "B" something and then can't deliver the goods, "B" can sue to recover his loss. It's a private matter. But if from the beginning "A" never intended to deliver, this would constitute criminal fraud." John J. Horgan, *Criminal Investigation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 250.

³ FHA Investigation - *Hearings Before the Committee on Banking and Currency - United States Senate* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954), 2731.

⁴ Stanley Frank, "Beware of Home-Repair Racketeers," *Saturday Evening Post* 229, no. 3 (1956): 17, 80, 82-83.

⁵ The first Better Business Bureau was established in Minneapolis in 1914. The concept quickly spread to dozens of cities around the country, building upon the work of advertising vigilance clubs that sought "truth in advertising." The Association for Better Business Bureaus was an umbrella organization representing local bureaus across the country. The National Better Business Bureau focused on national advertising campaigns. In 1971 the two organizations merged in 1971. Charles R. Geisst, *Encyclopedia of American Business History* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006), 53.

the homeowner felt they had been ripped off or deceived in some way.⁶ In 1960 the association lodged over 260,000 complaints and inquiries, more than double the number it received in 1953. It estimated the losses from these practices at over \$500 million a year.⁷

Home improvement scamming reached new heights in the 1950s for several reasons. First, more people owned more homes than ever before and many were first time homeowners in new communities. Infrastructures—both personal and commercial—to support work on houses in these areas were only being established. Retailers were just starting to develop full-fledged remodeling centers. Suburban homeowners, separated from their old neighborhoods, no longer had a superintendent to call when something needed to be fixed or network of trusted sources for work and materials. At a time when door-to-door salesmen were still common sight, when regulation was lax, when credit was loose, it was not surprising that so many homeowners trusted remodeling salesmen who asked only for a signature and who turned out to be swindlers.

Home improvement swindlers employed various stratagems for separating gullible customers from their money (Figure 5.1). Model home scams promised "commissions" for subsequent sales in the surrounding area resulting from the customer's house being used as a sample in advertising. Bait and switch pitches

⁶ "1954 FHA Investigation - Part 1 - 1-836", 570.

⁷ Sylvia Porter, "See How 'Referral Selling' Swindle Robs the Suckers," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 21, 1961, 12. Another report stated that 1966 was the fourteenth year home improvement activity was the number one source of complaints received by Better Business Bureaus across the country. Curt Gentry, *The Vulnerable Americans* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 111. At the local level, in 1953 alone, the Detroit Better Business Bureau received 1,600 complaints relating to home improvement work. *1954 FHA Investigation*, 2726.

alluringly low-priced windows, doors, and kitchen counter installations that were no longer available or denigrated in favor of superior (and more expensive) versions when the customer visited the showroom. Itinerant swindlers employed scare tactics to sell roofing, chimney, and furnace improvements, cautioning homeowners that small faults could lead to collapse or explosions. Free inspections often uncovered what the salesmen presented as urgently necessary large-scale renovation work.

Scammers attempted to pass off a variety of traditional building materials— asphalt roof shingles, bathroom tiles, flooring. But a succession of new treatments and products appeared during the postwar period that swindlers found they could use to dazzle homeowners with nearly miraculous claims of durability, longevity, and good style. From the 1940s to around 1955, scammers favored a type of thick, plastic-based "mastic paint" that had to be blown on a home's exterior surface with a gun and air compressor. Quickly applied, the coating supposedly ensured an end to regular painting and siding maintenance (Figure 5.2).⁸ Mid-decade, swindlers turned to aluminum siding. In the latter 1960s and for decades after, home improvement scammers found that aluminum storm windows, and aluminum (and then vinyl) window treatments in general could be very profitable. An atmosphere of rapid

⁸ A substantial percentage of the fraud cases described in the 1954 FHA hearings were of homeowners swindled by mastic paint dealers. The *Saturday Evening Post* reported that in the first half of 1954 mastic paint scams took Southern California consumers for \$6 million. Frank, "Beware of Home-Repair Racketeers," 82. The following quote, from a selling manual uncovered during the 1954 hearings, exemplified how the material was pitched to consumers. According to the instructions, salesmen were told to say mastic paint was "the most amazing material that has ever been devised for the purpose of revitalizing, beautifying and insulating the exterior of homes through a new highly specialized process. The product is a pressure-sealed side wall resurfacers which will insulate, protect, and beautify as nothing else can—it is waterproof and contains the two indestructible minerals, imported asbestos fiber and mica and it is not merely nailed on—but fused to the surface by powerful pressure and this becomes one and the same." *1954 FHA Investigation*, 480.

innovation and the appearance on the market of new products with which consumers were previously unfamiliar opened opportunities for rip-offs. Those pitching paints and siding products made of Space Age materials, were working in a culture already attuned to incredible claims of futuristic products with astonishing properties—to thwart time, to arrest decay, to carry Americans into the future.

Much home improvement scamming in the postwar era was associated with a federal initiative called Title I of the National Housing Act of 1934. This Depression-era program was designed to inject cash into the housing market, encouraging banks to lend homeowners money without risk for much needed improvements. Administered by the Federal Housing Administration, Title I provided government guarantees for homeowner loans of up to \$2,500 for approved remodeling work with repayment within three years. Between its introduction and 1952 over 14 million owners borrowed an average of \$400 each. One fifth of the total FHA loans and mortgages were for home improvement.⁹ This volume of work, and lack of oversight by a perpetually underfunded and understaffed FHA made it a rich tool for fraudulent activity.¹⁰ Shady salesmen and dealers urged customers to sign FHA loans loan agreements, took those agreements to a bank, investment company, or other FHA-accredited lender, which would "discount" the paper, purchasing it for cash from the

⁹ Irving H. Welfeld, *HUD Scandals: Howling Headlines and Silent Fiascoes* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 18.

¹⁰ Title I fraud was as old as the law itself. In the postwar era, the Los Angeles Better Business Bureau recounted that Title I fraud had been a problem since the legislation was passed in 1930s, with swindlers generating thousands of complaints from defrauded customers. *1954 FHA Investigation*, 1713.

During the war, because of material shortages, the government amended FHA rules to stipulate that only houses deemed uninhabitable could qualify for Title I funding. This set off a different wave of fraud as homeowners had to certify that their homes would be uninhabitable in 90 days if the work was not undertaken.

dealer and then becoming the lender who collected the monthly payments from homeowners. Financial institutions purchased the paper under the Title I program which backed the loans, knowing that in the case of a homeowner default they could forward the debt to the federal government for reimbursement.

This chapter takes as its theme the insinuation of swindlers into the postwar home improvement market, the response of homeowners to encounters with fraudulent practices, and impacts of those practices on the built environment and the remodeling industry. The first part characterizes the various participants in these activities, the salesmen and dealers, their homeowner customers, and a variety of other players from bankers to government officials. Examining the relationships between these actors reveals a complicated web of manipulation, and also codependence. Manufacturers used unscrupulous salesmen to push new products into new markets. To thrive, salesmen needed those same manufacturers to remain detached and lax in monitoring "on the ground" selling processes. Homeowners were a mix of duped and duplicitous. Some were outright victims, others sought to victimize. Officials in between—at banks and in the government—often acted ways that perpetuated, rather than hindered remodeling fraud.

The model home racket, one of the most popular home improvement scams of the postwar period is the subject of the second part of the chapter. A homeowner's desire to raise their status—within their community and among their peers—was essential to the remodeling scammers' success. Playing on a desire to have the latest facade finish or updated wrought-iron porch treatment, salesmen cruised neighborhoods with alluring promises that, if a remodeling purchase was made, the

customer's residence would serve as a model that could be used in local and national advertising. Such pitches, which stroked the homeowner's ego, were as persuasive to many as was the talk of monetary or labor savings said to accompany the improvement. Remodeling scams often left lasting marks upon physical space. Whole streetscapes were changed as homeowners covered old clapboard with new aluminum, added storm windows, and enclosed porches. But often within a period of weeks or months, hasty installations, dubious materials, and under qualified workers also marked the sites of swindles. Fraud could leave so-called improved homes and entire neighborhoods worse off than they were before. Fraud often wiped away the financial security of its victims, leaving few resources to correct the damages or for future maintenance and repair.

The chapter's final section explores how remodeling swindlers often targeted impoverished, urban-dwelling African-Americans. The rising incomes and homeownership of some, combined with ongoing racial and economic discrimination to make the black community especially appealing to scammers and often susceptible to their pitches. Washington DC turned out to be a hotbed of such scamming activity. In 1967, almost a dozen home improvement firms that operated in the District were under Federal investigation for second mortgage scams.¹¹ The Monarch Construction Company's defrauding of dozens of low-income African-Americans in Washington, DC between 1963 and 1965 serves as a brief case study. The episode was typical in the techniques the swindlers employed and exceptional in the publicity it generated,

¹¹ Leonard Downie, Jr. and David A. Jewell, "Suit Hits Mortgage Abuses: Misled on Loan Terms, Claim Homeowners," *Washington Post*, October 2, 1967, A1.

even before it ensnared a US Congressman.

A short summary of remodeling fraud between the 1970s and the present shows that despite the numerous, investigations, and the legislative, and public education efforts of the intervening years, scams described in this chapter continued to appear for decades to come. Some of the structural characteristics of today's home improvement industry may in part be a legacy of postwar fraud. Did swindles further change already underway in how consumers considered remodeling projects, and how remodelers marketed their products and services to consumers?

What was described as a small but active minority of unscrupulous salesmen, dealers, contractors, bankers, officials and homeowners sullied the remodeling industry's reputation in the 1950s and 60s. Mass circulation magazines and newspapers carried innumerable cautionary articles about the predations of home improvement swindlers. Their *modi operandi* were revealed in Congressional hearings held in New York City, Detroit, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Los Angeles in the summer of 1954. Members of the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency investigated the epidemic of remodeling swindles centering around FHA Title I home improvement loans.¹²

The testimony and exhibits that emerged from the hearings laid bare the players and processes of postwar home improvement fraud. Senators heard dramatic

¹² The investigations also focused upon the windfall profits developers and builders made off the FHA Section 608 rental housing program, often with the collusion of FHA officials. Investing little upfront capital in such projects, many developers earned over a million dollars before having to make any payments on their FHA construction loan. The committee issued 5 volumes of testimony collected in: *FHA Investigation: Hearings Before the Committee on Banking and Currency, United States Senate, Eighty-Third Congress, Second Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 229. Volumes 1-5.* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954).

testimony of dodgy dealings between homeowners and fake roofing salesmen, dubious siding contractors and unscrupulous financial institutions. Local newspapers published stories meant to alert the public about the swindler's practices (and sometimes, their arrival in town). Local Better Business Bureau offices issued booklets describing common scam tactics and the presence of swindling teams spotted in a particular locale. These source materials provide insights into how swindlers worked their way into the remodeling market, as well as the vivid responses of the homeowners who encountered them.

Players

The world of postwar home improvement fraud was rich in colorful nomenclature. Swindlers were sharpies, gyps, hucksters, hoaxers, chisellers, shysters, fast-talking gimmie artists, sunshine boys and suede-shoe boys. They targeted homeowners whom they considered suckers, chumps, marks, dupes, mooches, and pigeons. In between were the "clouts"—lower level bank and FHA employees who greased the wheels of fraudulent home improvement financing arrangements, signing off on false loans in exchange for gifts of cash payoffs. In various combinations, individuals from these groups interacted to perpetrate remodeling fraud. Their roles and relationships will be discussed further in this section.

Author Curt Gentry identified two general categories of postwar home improvement scammers: fly-by-night operators and company men.¹³ The former hoped to be mistaken for legitimate itinerant salesmen and tinkerers who went from

¹³ Gentry, *The Vulnerable Americans*, 112.

town to town peddling household products and services door-to-door. These traditional "drummers" were staples of American retail experience, working either independently or for well-established direct-selling firms like the Fuller Brush Company, Watkins Incorporated, and, beginning in 1959, Amway.¹⁴ Fly-by-night remodeling swindlers were also known as "mass-production boys," who practiced the "short-con." They worked in volume, making quick scores of relatively low value and then avoiding prosecution and reprisals from disgruntled customers by fleeing before their chicanery was fully revealed.¹⁵

Bulletins issued by the Better Business Bureau reveal how fly-by-night operators moved with the seasons, wintering in the south and moving north with the first buds of spring.¹⁶ April and May brought grass seed salesmen who guaranteed lawns that only grew three inches high and never required mowing. Aluminum storm door and window swindlers arrived north with the first chilly weather promising to end drafts and high heating bills. The onset of winter also brought out "Furnace Fakers" offering to inspect the homeowner's iron furnace for leaks and to clean and paint it in preparation for winter. Instead, they dismantled the entire furnace and, discovering that parts were "broken, " or "leaking dangerously," the faker would insist that a new system was immediately required. If the customer demurred, the faker threatened to

¹⁴ All three firms were still in business as of 2013. While they still count on some door-to-door sales, they have adopted "multi-level marketing" approaches that also include phone sales, party sales, and an increasing amount of retail sales.

¹⁵ Horgan, *Criminal Investigation*, 250.

¹⁶ See, for example: "...Spring Rackets," *Better Business Bureau Bulletin* 27, no. 12 (1948): 2, and "Warning on Furnace Repair Racket," *Better Business Bureau Bulletin* 29, no. 29 (1955): 1. Although the Kansas City office published this issue, other offices likely compiled articles and distributed the bulletin nationally.

leave the parts scattered around the basement floor, the home without heat.¹⁷

Well-known (at least to authorities) clans of Irish and Scottish families worked a north/south circuit offering all kinds of home repairs and improvements (Figure 5.3). Women in the group pitched fabrics supposedly woven by the hands of elderly mothers and aunts in the Old Country. Men scared homeowners into purchasing the installation of false lightning rods that were little more than wooden dowels and rope painted silver. The most common scam perpetrated by these itinerant groups featured a member posing as a local installer returning from a job on another side of town. Pulling up with his truck and materials, he approached a homeowner saying he had just finished a job nearby and had just enough left over linoleum to cover the homeowner's bathroom floor or just enough tar to renew their driveway. Instead of throwing the material away, the swindler offered to sell and install it at a special price. Using degraded or knock-off material and usually without the necessary cleaning or preparation of substrates, they completed the application, demanded an excessive fee, extracted the cash, and left town.

Perhaps most notorious of these clans was the "Terrible Williamsons." Violent and insular to the point of reputed inbreeding, the group was composed of 75 to 100 families who were based in Sarasota, Florida but never stayed put for long. (In Sarasota they were called the "city's first family of fraud," with a reputation of being able to "sell palm trees in Alaska.")¹⁸ A 1956 *Saturday Evening Post* profile described a typical Williamson house painting pitch:

¹⁷ "Spring Rackets," *Better Business Bureau Bulletin*, 28: 14 (April 20, 1949), 3.

¹⁸ Tom Tiede, "The Terrible Williamsons - 1st Family of Fraud," *Sarasota Journal*, May 9, 1973, 11C.

The younger males of the clan prowled the backcountry in trucks full of paints and spray drums, looking for peeling houses or barns. Flashing business cards (Treated Shingles Never Warp, Williamson & Sons, Barn Painting, Roof Painting, Oil Treating, Our Specialty), ten-year certificates of guarantee and cans of nationally known paints, they offer a cut-rate job. Then they stretch a few dollars' worth of the paint with so much crankcase oil and other noisome adulterants that with the first rainfall it washes off, leaving the house and ground below in a hideous and highly-flammable mess."¹⁹

Gentry's second group of home improvement swindlers, the "company men," was more organized and professional. They practiced longer cons requiring a more detailed set up than the fly-by-night "punks" or "pikers."²⁰ Company men presented themselves as legitimate salesmen and dealer-contractors representing nationally known manufacturers and, in partnership with respectable local businesses, financial institutions and government agencies. The company men dealt in contracts and signatures, carried attractive sales kits with samples and before and after imagery. They had sophisticated sales pitches that seemed to offer exactly what the homeowner wanted. The most prominent of home improvement company men were called suede-shoe boys. Dressed in fancy clothes and with an overwhelming preference for Cadillacs, their style was meant to signal success and prosperity to customers and colleagues alike.²¹ But in time the costumes became a means outsiders used to identify the shady dealer, warning signs that consumer advocates told homemakers to watch

¹⁹ John Kobler, "The Terrible Williamsons," *Saturday Evening Post* (1956). The Williamsons were also discussed in: Ezra Stotland, "White Collar Criminals," *Journal of Social Issues* 33, no. 4 (1977): 179-196, in George Robeson, "Be Very Wary of Those Phony Gypsies," *Press-Telegram*, November 9, 1967. B3, and William Harrell, "The Swindling Williamsons," In *Pros and Cons: Incredible True Tales About Famous Con Men, Frauds, Hoaxers, and Beguiling Swindlers*, ed. Art Moger (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1975).

²⁰ Gentry, *The Vulnerable Americans*, 113. The terms "punks" and "pikers" are used in: Horgan, *Criminal Investigation*, 250.

²¹ Among their peers, the best suede-shoe boys were called "dynamiters," a reference to both their efficacy at winning sales and the destructive result of their high-pressure swindles.

out for.

It was common for home improvement swindlers to have little or no experience in construction or building material supply. In fact, many were small-time crooks and con men drawn to the remodeling market by the quick money to be made especially through government-insured Title I projects. The 1954 investigations revealed that the suede-shoe boys working remodeling scams often had criminal records. Many gravitated from other areas of shady selling such as used car sales. They were hired because they could bring in sales; prior convictions, indictments, and jail time served were rarely a bar to employment by selling organizations. In fact, criminal pasts often served as credentials, allowing entrée into operations that were themselves criminal in nature and function. Some home improvement businesses specializing in Title I projects, for example, were front organizations used as a cover for mob-affiliated criminals moving into areas to establish bookmaking and gambling operations. Mobsters Felix "Milwaukee Phil" Alderisio, Mickey Cohen, Louis Thomas Fratto and Irwin "Pinky" Davis were tied to various scams using home improvement companies as cover for other illicit activity.²²

Swindling salesmen roamed the country in search of lucrative territories and dealers who valued their particular skills. They were "closers" who got the contracts signed at any cost and any time, day or night. Often they banded together working under brokers, or selling organizations, that pitched remodeling jobs to consumers on behalf of local dealer-contractors, contractors, and manufacturers. Salesmen who

²² Fratto testified at the 1954 hearings, Cohen was named often in the hearings (his brother Harry Cane was a witness). Fratto's cousin, Alderisio, was boss to Pinky Davis who turned informer in 1970. Irwin Davis, "Marked for Death: Mafia Pulls Financial Swindle," *Press-Telegram*, June 23, 1970, A8.

made up the crew usually worked on a "bonus" or "cost-plus" basis in which dealer-contractors or manufacturers would price a job (per 100 square feet) at what was called the "par." Any amount that the salesman was able to wring from the customer above the par price (minus a commission to the sales manager) was his profit. Various reports claimed that salesmen could make a profit of between 200 and 400 percent above par.²³ So, for example, Reynolds Aluminum Company sold a railroad carload of exterior residential siding to a dealer-contractor. The company then put the dealer into contact with a broker who provided the local sales infrastructure necessary to sell the load before the dealer's bill from Reynolds came due.

Salesmen ideally worked from leads—potential customers who previously expressed interest in a product by sending in a reply card they received in a mailing or clipped from an advertisement. Manufacturers or dealers would give or sell these leads to brokers or local dealer-contractors. If the selling organization were entering a market cold they typically established what were known as "boiler rooms." These were low-rent spaces where up to twenty agents went through the "telephone crisscross" a book of telephone numbers cross-referenced to address published by the phone company and distributed for a fee to businesses. Agents telephoned homeowners in targeted neighborhoods to try to interest them in the offer and arrange a sales visit. Cold selling was also practiced door-to-door. First, "bird dogs" canvassed neighborhoods for houses in need of upgrading, and flushed out likely marks. The bird dog made the initial pitch and, if successful, arranged a meeting with the "closer."

The compartmentalized, independent arrangement of responsibilities and

²³ 1954 *FHA Investigation*, 2725.

obligations between manufacturer, dealer-contractor, broker, and salesman served to insulate each group from each other. Each level up the chain could feign ignorance of the practices of those below. Manufacturers denied any culpability (or even awareness) of how their materials were marketed and sold to consumers. When asked during the 1954 hearings about the manner in which salesmen pitched his residential siding to homeowners, Alside, Inc. founder Jerome J. Kaufman, answered, "That is up to their own discretion, how they run their business." On two other occasions during his brief appearance, Kaufman stated, "we are manufacturing. We are not in retail siding" and "We are a manufacturer, not in retail selling."²⁴

The structure allowed those immediately above the salesmen to deny any awareness of what approaches those salesmen used to close a deal. Numerous dealer-contractors and sales managers working for selling organizations depicted salesmen as ungovernable, disloyal, and nearly feral. Jack Wolfe, of General Builders, an aluminum siding dealer-contractor in Des Moines, Iowa, told William Simon, Chief Counsel for the 1954 investigation:

Mr. WOLFE. Well, the minute I would call my salesmen on the carpet and tell them not to do this, not to do that, they would quit me and go work for the opposition.

Mr. SIMON. In other words, the salesmen were unethical salesmen and if you wanted them to be ethical they would quit you and work for your competitors?

Mr. WOLFE. The salesmen could not be controlled. I am not saying they were not ethical but there was no way I could control the salesmen, because I was never in any home when the salesmen making a pitch or making their sales talk.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 2900.

²⁵ *1954 FHA Investigation*, 2393. Wolfe was hardly the spineless innocent he portrayed before the committee. He had run or been involved with numerous other siding operations in two states, was connected to mobster Lew Ferrell, and had previously been indicted for serving as a bag man collecting money from liquor dealers in Des Moines.

Because they were not present during the discussions with homeowners, dealer-contractors and manufacturers did not consider themselves bound to any verbal promises made by salesmen—any talk of commissions, guarantees, or assertions of the product's longevity.

Salesmen benefitted from an atomized and obscure chain of responsibility in that they could create a perception on the part of the customer that the salesman was actually a factory representative, employed directly by the manufacturer. As part of the model home scam, for example, salesmen routinely represented themselves as being from headquarters or the main office. A clandestine guide to the model home racket that turned up during one investigation counseled would-be practitioners, "Sell your appearance, attitude, and self-confidence. Know the deal. Be sure of yourself. You are a factory executive, not a salesman."²⁶ As Wolfe's testimony above also suggests, the salesman's rootlessness and anonymity were important keys to their success. Many had multiple aliases, and their true names were often unknown even to the selling organizations that employed them. They were able to jump from one dealer or product to the next at will. Some salesmen already working for one firm carried the contract order books for other companies at the same time.²⁷ They could also leave town quickly when investigators or disgruntled customers sought them out.

Alongside the thousands of unequivocally criminal swindlers, was a much

²⁶ Around 1952 fraudulent remodeling companies in New Jersey established a "school" for model home swindlers. Operators of the training included in the "textbook" a guide that led the salesman around an illustrated baseball diamond maneuvering the mark to the sales close at home base. *1954 FHA Investigation*, 479.

²⁷ *1954 FHA Investigation*, 3360.

greater multitude of salesmen and dealers who engaged in ethically dubious, if not explicitly illegal selling practices. They might mildly misrepresent a new product's qualities, they might target customers with credit applications knowing the latter were unlikely to be able to make the payments without hardship, they might use fear inducing pitches about the dangers of not replacing older furnaces or appliances. Critics claimed that such approaches were all too common during a period in which an increasingly mobile society and mass-consumption oriented retail sector severed the personal relationships between seller and customer that were traditionally forged on local main streets and along established salesman routes.²⁸

The fast-talking salesmen, the dodgy dealer, and the indifferent manufacturer did not work alone. It took the active involvement or blind eyes of others to approve and process the paperwork and to collect and distribute the money involved. Once the homeowner (often unwittingly) signed the improvement loan, the selling organization would take this "paper" for discounting at a lending institution. The bank would buy the loan, paying its holder cash and assume responsibility for its collection. Conscientious lenders investigated remodeling firms before purchasing paper from them and followed up on complaints by consumers who felt they were ripped off (in some cases going as far as to discontinue any association and suing the remodelers themselves). The 1954 FHA hearings, however, found that many banks failed to conduct due diligence on the firms with which they were working or the consumers whose loans they were purchasing. Investigators uncovered repeated cases where

²⁸ For an example of contemporary concerns over a postwar crisis in business ethics, see: Vrest Orton, "The Decay of Ethics," *Journal of Retailing*, Summer (1957).

banks continued to purchase paper from contractors and dealers despite receiving numerous accusations of work that was fraudulently substandard or incomplete and of borrowers who were unaware that they had signed loans and certificates of completion. The Chairman of the Congressional investigation stated:

I can understand homeowners being fleeced for these kind of people. I know there are people with very little education. I can't understand, and that is one thing we are checking into very carefully, how they can fleece bankers, who ought to know and have facilities and money to check these people and certainly ought not to have been so hungry for business that they would be a part of fleecing the American homeowner. There has been too much of it going on. We found so much of it, it has really been sickening and nauseating.²⁹

Governmental officials were also implicated in home improvement swindles. Testimony revealed numerous cases of FHA administrators ignoring complaints of Title I swindles in exchange for cash payments and Christmas presents of whisky or watches. Investigators were astonished that despite becoming aware of the fraudulent activities of certain remodeling firms, FHA staff did not put these companies on the administration's precautionary list and failed to respond to consumers who felt they had been ripped off. The U.S. Assistant Attorney General stated that "during the period when these home improvement frauds were most prevalent—that is, from 1948 to 1952—FHA actually investigated only nine of the specific cases out of a total of 167 allegations of fraud which had been referred to it by the FBI for investigation." "They had also swallowed, literally, hundreds of complaints of fraud received from other sources."³⁰

Swindlers called those on the inside of legitimate businesses and government

²⁹ *1954 FHA Investigation*, 2728.

³⁰ "1,000 FHA Fraud Charges Wait Action," *Arizona Republic*, April 11, 1955, 2.

agencies, who greased wheels and looked the other way when encountering wrongdoing, "clouts." Harry Cane, the mob-connected owner of a Chicago-based selling organization stated that "this business could not have prospered without that type of cooperation; namely, known as a clout in the bank and a clout at the FHA."³¹ Clouts were not difficult to come by at financial institutions. Federal government guarantees of FHA Title I loans meant that banks never stood to lose money on such deals. As a result lenders were not overly concerned with the reputation of contractors and salesmen or the financial stability of borrowers. Those who processed loans often did so with little or no oversight from their superiors. One mob informant told the *Chicago Sun-Times* how easy it was to turn a young assistant vice president responsible for consumer loans into a pliant stooge, willing to take "substandard and sometimes worthless" paper that other banks had rejected. Irwin "Pinky" Davis, underling of "Milwaukee Phil" Alderisio, said that, the executive, "with a salary of \$142 a week from the bank, had a wife and family to support, and we made a patsy out of him through a home improvement finance racket."³² Davis' operation would buy bad loans from dealer-contractors, then sell them to the executive's bank, which would then turn them over to the Federal Government for reimbursement as per the Title I guarantee.

The media often stereotyped the swindler's targets of choice as "very old women and very young brides" tricked into giving up the family savings when their

³¹ 1954 *FHA Investigation*, 2388.

³² Davis, "Marked for Death: Mafia Pulls Financial Swindle," *Press-Telegram*, June 23, 1970, A8.

husbands were away.³³ In fact, scammers did not discriminate by gender, age, or economic group. Instead they developed a catholic awareness of marks of all types and developed myriad pitches based on a street understanding of human insecurity, desperation, and greed. Swindlers considered husbands easy to goad into agreements when in the presence of their spouses. Swindlers also saw those customers who thought they could rip off the salesman as easy marks. According to one contemporary scholar, "The act of buying is for the bargain hunter not a rational situation but a battle of wits. He tries to outsmart the seller who, on the other hand, seeks to give him, the involuntary "sucker," the narcissistic illusion of triumph."³⁴ The envy that owners of older homes felt toward new homeowners' amenities and modernity could also be parleyed into sales. Swindlers were equally aware, and prepared to take advantage, of the social pressures of keeping up with neighbors—in newer suburbs and in established communities.³⁵

The nature and degree of consumer complicity in fraudulent home improvement activity varied considerably. Some trusting individuals truly had no idea they were being taken and were in no way a party to the rip off underway (Figure 5.4).

³³ George Robeson, "Be Very Wary of Those Phony Gypsies," *Press-Telegram*, November 9, 1967, B3. They were considered especially vulnerable to the persuasions of workmen who pleaded for the woman to sign certificates of completion before the work was completed, so that laborers could be paid and feed their families.

³⁴ Stanley C. Hollander, "The American Retailer—Subservient to the Public?" *Journal of Retailing* (October 1958): 143-153. Hollander was paraphrasing an argument by Edmund Bergler.

³⁵ Swindlers were also common in the new home market. The author of a 1953 article in *Man's Life* magazine shared his experience. "If you are wondering how stupid a guy can get I can assure you that people buying new houses every day are being taken for a lot more than I was. Although there's no shortage of housing these days, if you're not careful you're apt to get stuck with one whale of a shortage of house. The art of advertising and merchandising houses in new developments is "far in advance of the craftsmanship which goes into building them, and the come-ons, deceptions and model-house misrepresentations make buying almost irresistible." Art Rayburn, "Dream House or Nightmare?" *Man's Life* (November 1953): 33.

They were victims, shocked to find they had been sold criminally inferior materials, or locked into long-term loans with high monthly payments. Those living on shoestring budgets, with leaking roofs or peeling paint and no extra cash to pay for their repair saw the scammer's pitch as the answer to their needs. Liberalized consumer credit made the poor—once too small a fish for most swindlers—into potentially lucrative new marks. Unsophisticated borrowers, able to make large purchases with just a signature and unable to resist smooth-talk, were the scammer's dream mark.

Machine operator James Taylor and his wife Mary of Wisconsin had money management difficulties and what consumer caseworkers called "a lack of sales resistance."³⁶ With door-to-door remodeling salesmen and swindlers regularly stopping by, the Taylors spent three fourths of the value of their home on improvements, signing six installment contracts for siding, a furnace, awnings, aluminum windows, a garage, and carpeting (the latter charged for, but never installed). Describing the predatory practices of door-to-door salesman, Mary Taylor said:

They always used to just drop in. We didn't send for any of them. Just a short while after we bought this house — maybe two weeks — the salesmen began to knock on the door. We did need some things though, and when the salesmen would present these things to us so nicely, well, we just found ourselves biting at everything that came along.³⁷

While the Taylor's commitments meant living beyond their means, they always signed contracts with the intention of paying for the items received. The culpability of such

³⁶ *The Spender Syndrome: Case Studies of 68 Families and Their Consumer Problems*, came with acetate recording of several interviews (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin, University Extension, 1965), 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

victims was limited to their credulity, there was no duplicitous intent in their purchases or in similar customers participation in what turned out to be swindles.

The testimony compiled during the Congressional hearings reveals, however, that many homeowners were willing to enter into ethically questionable and outright illegal arrangements to get home improvements on the cheap. Outside of the legal details of what was and was not allowed under FHA regulations were the ethical issues involved in serving as representatives in which friends, neighbors, and relatives, in many cases clandestinely, served as representatives of a company and product with the purpose of obtaining financial gain without others knowing. At the least, most had no qualms about giving names of others to the salesmen as potential leads. Others were willing to go much farther, from signing false loan applications that defrauded the government to lending their names and reputation to efforts by shifty sales teams and installer-dealers to take advantage of neighbors and friends.

Numerous homeowners colluded with home improvement swindlers by knowingly signing FHA loan papers for amounts above the actual cost of the project. The difference was given to the customer often as a cash payment up front to be used toward the purchase of a car, furnishings, or to "consolidate debts." Veterans used home improvement loans they were entitled to through the G.I. Bill on the construction of new houses or garages. Some served as "straw men," fronts who took out remodeling loans even though they were not homeowners or let others use their names to do likewise. Such scams were common in the first decade of the postwar era and in part, were what motivated the 1954 Senate investigation.

When customers who filled out fraudulent home improvement loans realized

they were not just swindling, but being swindled by the salesman (by receiving inferior products or installations), they were reluctant to go to authorities. Contractors and dealers who initiated the swindle and got homeowners involved could threaten to bring the customer down with them if prosecuted. Senator Wallace Bennett, on the committee investigating FHA abuses recognized this as an intentional strategy of the home improvement scammer:

Here is a man who comes along with a new program that works out a problem that they wouldn't work out in the ordinary sense, and he doesn't represent it as an improper program. He represents it as an improvement, a new device by which an old problem can be solved more easily, and a lot of people are eager for that, and, as I said earlier, one of the devices that has been used in this process is to persuade the property owner to do something that was improper so that when he complained he could be threatened with legal action if he carried his through."³⁸

A Long Beach, California FHA administrator recounted how he suspected that a housewife who had filed a complaint against a remodeling firm, and then retracted it, had been pressured to do so. He testified that she broke down crying during a meeting, saying that after filing a complaint against a remodeling swindler, he returned to warn her that by signing the original contract she was a party to any fraud. He threatened that "if he was to be prosecuted he was going to bring her into it as a party to the transaction, and he was going to arrange to have the trial held some distance away from her home, which meant that she would have to travel back and forth from one point to another, with all her family and children."³⁹

³⁸ *1954 FHA Investigation*, 1763.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1709.

Model Home Rackets

Not all consumer involvement that home improvement swindlers elicited was outright fraud. A national culture of promotion and consumption drew homemakers into ambiguous relationships with what they thought were essentially legitimate sales operations. What was generally known as the model home racket was one of the swindling salesman's favorite tools for locking in a deal.⁴⁰ It worked on the greedy, the desperate, and the deal seeker; it reduced impediments by supposedly lowering the cost of an improvement while boosting the esteem of the homeowner. A closer examination of how this scam was perpetrated offers insights into how the consumer was imbricated in the selling process and made an easy mark by the swindling salesman.

Alternately referred to as the demonstration home racket, pilot house promotion, show house scheme, or showcase gimmick, the swindle originated earlier in the century but came into much greater use during the postwar era. Salesmen honed the scam in the 1950s, updating it and the products it featured for a new economic and cultural reality.⁴¹ Past and present salesmen using the pitch promised homeowners that, if they became customers, their house would serve as the centerpiece of a local or even national promotional campaign. The homeowner was offered a purportedly special price for the remodeling work, but the figure was of no consequence, assured

⁴⁰ The *Saturday Evening Post* called it "The suède-shoe boys' old, reliable meal ticket...which has been flourishing since man emerged from the cave." Frank, "Beware of Home-Repair Racketeers," 80.

⁴¹ The 1954 coast-to-coast Congressional hearings confirmed the widespread use of model home scams. Salesmen-scammers moved from selling ordinary building products to those that promised ease, convenience, and lifetime durability, like mastic paint or aluminum siding. The national Better Business Bureau office found that scamming salesmen were using model home rackets to sell "roofing, siding, brick-veneer fronts, shingles, patios, porches, painting, and other similar improvements." *1954 FHA Investigation*, 578.

the salesman, as the homeowner would receive regular commissions of between \$25 and \$50 for each additional job sold in the area. Since these payments would exceed the homeowner's loan payments, the remodeling would essentially be obtained for free. The homeowner's obligations were different depending on the salesman's pitch and the consumer's degree of resistance. Many were asked to sign (phony) releases granting permission for photos of their home to be used in advertisements (Figure 5.5). For some, commissions were contingent upon sales resulting from the homeowner's opening their house to prospective customers and talking about their satisfaction with the product or installation being sold. Salesman also regularly asked customers for the names of other relatives, friends, and neighbors who might be interested in similar work. On the West Coast, one home improvement swindler modified the model home pitch by offering housewives a more formal contract for her to serve as a representative earning \$35 a month. In exchange she was to promote the mastic paint applied to her home's facade. "She agreed to talk pleasantly to people that they might bring to the door and agreed to sprinkle the outside of the house to keep it clean once every three months. For that she was to get a payment which would amount to the monthly payment under the FHA loan."⁴²

The rip off embedded in the model home pitch was not in offering commissions or obtaining endorsements from satisfied customers. Indeed, such practices were increasingly becoming pillars of American marketing. The Better Business Bureau noted that some reputable dealers also used a nominal cash payment

⁴² *1954 FHA Investigation*, 1718. From the testimony it is not clear how common this approach was or what type of experience the women had as representatives.

for leads that led to sales, but the "legitimate contractor does not use such promised payments as part of the sales inducement, nor does he imply such payments will be many in number."⁴³ Instead, the fraud lay in the almost universal fact that the swindling salesman and the company he supposedly represented never intended, and never in fact, paid out any commissions to homeowners. It was also the case that the prices salesmen charged model racket participants were not wholesale or less, but in fact usually quite more than the market rate.

Some who went to their neighbors to talk up their new home improvement quickly realized that others nearby had also signed contracts for identical work, and with the identical expectation that their home would serve as a model and bring in commissions. Within days of their contract being signed (sometimes before work even began) homeowners would find in the mail a payment book from the bank that had purchased their home improvement loan. They were now legally bound to send a monthly payment that frequently threatened to break the family budget, while waiting in vain for commissions that would never come. The model home scam was not always accompanied by the use of shoddy materials and substandard preparation and installation practices, but it was very common that homeowners found they had been ripped off with unfinished work, peeling siding, crumbling patio foundations, and leaking windows even before they realized that model home ad campaigns and commissions had only ever existed in the salesman's pitch and their hopeful imaginations.

Beyond the promised financial benefits to the model home pitch, such rackets

⁴³ "Model Leader Racket," *Better Business Bureau Bulletin* March 16, 1949, 2.

had two other primary persuasive hooks, they flattered the homeowner who was "selected" among all those in the neighborhood, and they played on the homeowners' desire for status within their community. By "selecting" the home to be a model for advertising and promotion, the salesman was also selecting the homeowner, or so the homeowner could think (Figure 5.6). A clandestine script for swindlers using the model home racket demonstrated word-for-word how the salesman was to phrase the flattery:

There has been an extensive search made in your neighborhood for the proper type of homes and homeowners who would fit into our picture for our advertising program. (Give example-National Periodical Advertising, etc.)

You folks have been highly recommended on our point system of choice through the survey made by our representatives. (Be complimentary). To be exact there are 4 homes in this area in more or less the same category—you folks are our No. 1 selection and I am here to give my approval. (Make light but short conversation.)⁴⁴

Homeowners who bought into the model home plan were encouraged to think of themselves as tastemakers and trendsetters within their community, whom others would look to for guidance.⁴⁵ The model homeowner got to be the sagacious one who had first recognized the new material or feature's value and quickly applied it to their homes. They were what the rural sociologist Everett Rogers, in his 1962 book *Diffusion of Innovations*, called "early adopters."⁴⁶ In studying how ideas and innovations spread through a culture, Rogers identified the importance of these influential members who helped shape tastes and acculturate new products as

⁴⁴ 1954 *FHA Investigation*, 480.

⁴⁵ Such feelings were no doubt heightened even further in the homeowners mind knowing (at least they thought) that they had paid less than everyone else would be paying for the same material or feature.

⁴⁶ See chapter 7, "Innovativeness and Adopter Categories," in: Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

desirable.

Consumers found the model home racket plausible in part because they were citizens of what Earl Shorris called "a nation of salesmen."⁴⁷ Throughout the postwar period, the once clear distinction between salesman and customer was eroding; everybody seemed to be buying and selling. As daily life became increasingly saturated with advertisements and come-ons, marketers developed increasingly sophisticated appropriations of word-of-mouth and testimonial promotions that seemed more personable to the consumer, and more effective to the promoter. It was the heyday of direct marketing, when products as disparate as air conditioning units and Bibles were sold door-to-door. It was the dawn of what is now called "multi-level marketing" in which companies turned their consumers into a potent sales force, the latter hosting other consumers at informal parties where products were presented and consumer orders taken. In this atmosphere, the model house pitch and the idea of receiving commissions for advancing sales was neither exceptional, nor suspicious.

The model home racket was a variation of referral selling, a sales technique in which manufacturers offered private individuals the opportunity, if they purchased a new vacuum cleaner, garbage disposal, fire alarm, or intercom system, to serve as "buyer representatives." In that role they provided leads to the manufacturer and received a gift or cash commission for every new individual they encouraged to make a similar purchase. The most prominent form of referral selling at the time was the "party sell," in which (usually) housewives invited relatives, neighbors, and

⁴⁷ Earl Shorris, *A Nation of Salesmen: The Tyranny of the Market and the Subversion of Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1994). Shorris dates the "enthronement" of homo vendens to the 1950s. See page 266.

acquaintances into their homes for a friendly gathering at which a line of products would be introduced, demonstrated, and orders placed. The selling party blended sociability and consumption in an atmosphere with pretensions to casual hospitality. In what must have been complicated social exchanges guest was also customer, host was seller. The manners of the good guest must have prompted sales, as nobody wanted to be the one not to buy. Companies such as Stanley Home Products and the Aluminum Cooking Utensil Company found party sells an ideal way to expand their house ware, silverware, cosmetic or appliance business. Of course, the best-known, most successful firm engaging in referral-party selling was Tupperware. By 1963, sales representatives of the self-sealing plastic kitchenware manufacture were hosting over a million parties a year.⁴⁸

Party sales were enormously popular, especially in new suburbs where community had to be invented from scratch and consumers needed products to stock their new homes. *Changing Times* magazine reported that in the early 1950s 20 million American women attended such parties each year.⁴⁹ The system was touted as "a natural for housewives who want to pick up some spare cash. Pleasant work, no experience required." *Life* magazine featured Tupperware's sales bonus winners were featured as symbols of success and American entrepreneurialism. Yet when *Changing Times* ran an article about selling parties, letters printed in subsequent issues revealed a strong aversion the practice at least among some of the magazine's subscribers. One wrote, "To my mind, people who give sales parties cheapen themselves and are just

⁴⁸ "Parties Put Them in the Spotlight." *Life*, May 3, 1963, 91.

⁴⁹ "Sales Parties in the Home," *Changing Times* (April 1954): 31.

working on the good nature of their friends."⁵⁰ The financial advice columnist Sylvia Porter when she described the insidious costs exacted when neighbors started trading personal relationships for financial gain and siccing salesmen on the family next door expressed a similar sentiment towards referral selling of all sorts. Addressing those who bought from salespeople introduced through referral she wrote, "What you have done is buy for a full price an expensive product which you may or may not want. What your neighbor has done is put you in a spot which will make you bitterly resent him, and you may be sure the neighbors you approach will in turn bitterly resent you."⁵¹

The model home pitch, like all referral selling, injected a dynamic of financial opportunism into the neighborhood, prompting homeowners to see their relationships as commodities. When consumers involved in a model home deal accepted the condition that they not mention the discount price and commissions they were receiving for endorsing and encouraging further projects with a salesman or dealer, their actions slipped toward complicity. According to one article, "The entire deal was to be 'kept quiet' the couple was told by the schemer, as the neighbors and others might become aware of it, and the sales might be affected."⁵² Such discretion played right into the swindler's hand, for with the rationale of not wanting to reduce the homeowners' opportunities for commissions, they could justify not including the arrangement in the printed contract.

⁵⁰ Anita Jane Bachersas, "Anti Sales Parties," Letter to the Editor. *Changing Times* (June 1954): 48.

⁵¹ Porter, "See How 'Referral Selling' Swindle Robs the Suckers", 12.

⁵² "'Demonstration Home' Schemer Leaves Couple with a \$1,253.52 Debt," *Better Business Bureau Bulletin* 29:32 (September 13, 1950), 1.

Lured in by the model home pitch, some customers quickly jettisoned any sense of solidarity with neighbors who they came to see as marks and a means to reduce their own monthly payments. More avaricious customers could really get into the process, adding their own lingo to a field already rich in evocative terminology. Anthony D'Aquila, a New York City sanitation worker, recounted how a fast-talking mastic paint salesman who promised a \$50 commission for each sale prompted by D'Aquila's model home visited him. At the 1954 FHA hearings, D'Aquila stated, "I...asked him about the \$50 that I was to get and how I was to get the \$50. He told me that he would have seven salesmen working in the vicinity and every time one of his salesmen brought a client around, or a fish, as I would call it." The investigator interjected at this point asking, "He didn't use the term 'fish' did he?" D'Aquila replied, "Well, I used it. I'm sorry. They were to give me a card with the people's names so that I could go over and look—if they ever collected on them, if they ever done the work."⁵³ In the end, D'Aquila turned out to be the fish. His mastic coating began to fail the first days after application and he never received a dime in commissions despite dozens of other homeowners in the area buying the same mastic treatment from the same company. In fact, most of the others had also signed on as model homes.

The debate about the culpability or complicity of the homeowner is common in the literature on consumer fraud. Perpetrators of home improvement swindles often thought (and justified their actions with the opinion) that you can't cheat an honest man, that marks deserved what they got because they too were looking to game the system. *Changing Times* scoffed "The promise of something for nothing is so

⁵³ 1954 FHA Investigation, 672.

obviously the signal of a gyp that there is scarcely a 12-year old child who would be taken in by it. Yet many an adult is fooled by sales gimmicks that are just about as transparent." While it was common to blame those who fell for scams as ignorant or greedy such characterizations oversimplified the complex dynamic that was at play in those moments of exchange between swindler and homeowner.

While some customers were comfortable referring and pitching in bad faith, but others sought to counter the swindlers and protect neighbors (both immediate and abstract). Many who testified at the 1954 Congressional hearings did so with the aim of making sure what happened to them didn't happen to others. The Better Business Bureau, which had no regulatory or punitive authority and could only alert future prospects of an unethical business, received thousands of complaints each year. A typical letter from a Long Island, New York, couple caught in a mastic paint model home scam, read, "I wanted to pass my dealings with this company on to you. Your files may already contain information on this concern, but I wanted to try, if they are as unreliable as they seem, to expose them and possibly save some other young struggling couples from a similar situation."⁵⁴

Model home racket victims often had complicated and conflicting motives for entering into agreements with salesmen who turned out to be swindlers. The pure of heart could be taken as easily as the avaricious. They may have had no intention of being party to a rip off, but were unable to pass up what they saw as a good deal. They might have known the agreement they were entering into compromised their integrity but they really needed that new siding. The author of a book about postwar fraud

⁵⁴ Ibid., 567.

wrote, "The lonely businessman who wants a little sex on the side...can be made to pay dearly for his indiscretion. But so can the householder who wants nothing more than to protect his family from ill health or to get his roof fixed."⁵⁵

Landscapes of Fraud

Home improvement fraud is typically characterized as a white-collar crime viewed in terms of contracts, loan applications, payment book stubs, guarantees, certificates of completion, subtractions from savings account passbooks, and statements entered into the record. It is important to remember, however, that such activities were physically written on the landscape. The persuasiveness of sales pitches, decisions made by couples at the kitchen table, the efficacy of consumer advocates and legislators in rooting out fraud, had real implications for the look of individual homes and entire communities. Third-rate and unfinished work diminished the appearance of residential exteriors. Adulterated materials hastened the deterioration they were meant to forestall. Exorbitant monthly payments sapped homeowners of the money needed for undoing the work and ongoing repairs. Almost every step of the swindle involved negotiation, interpretation, and reconfiguration of physical space.

With the exception of bait advertising, home improvement fraud was typically initiated door-to-door. Advance teams working block-by-block had to read the potential success of a future sales campaign in every aspect of the environment from

⁵⁵ Mary Carey and George Sherman, *A Compendium of Bunk or How to Spot a Con Artist: A Handbook for Fraud Investigators, Bankers and Other Custodians of the Public Trust* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1976), 4.

general maintenance levels to the presence of TV aerials and the makes of cars in the driveways. In the headquarters and boiler rooms on a low-rent side of town, that analysis was worked onto maps and telephone call lists. Cold call bird dogs canvassed the sidewalks of older neighborhoods and new suburban developments with handshakes and smiles, flushing out prospects. Timothy Spears' history of the traveling salesman describes how they developed an ability to quickly assess the economic opportunities of a new route or territory.⁵⁶ Canvassers and fly-by-night swindlers developed a similar proficiency at identifying houses ripe for remodeling pitches occupied by those with the inclination and means to be persuaded. For short con operators who were cash only, and who closed deals, conducted the work, and demanded payment in single visits, it was especially important to recognize homeowners with the financial resources on hand to be quickly scammed.

Pitches were ideally staged in a setting literally at home to the mark—the front yard, driveway, or inside living room or kitchen table. Such locations would seem to shift power to the customer (who was on their home turf, in familiar surroundings). In fact, swindlers counted on the assuredness that homeowners felt at home, for such ease actually made it easier to induce pliancy and move toward a closed sale. Swindlers also counted on the graciousness of their "host." Conventions of hospitality permitted them to stay at the table longer than they were welcome, often well into the night, steadily wearing down the mark until the latter relented and signed. It was not uncommon for deals to close at 11 o'clock at night, or later (Figure 5.7).

⁵⁶ Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

The materials and features they pitched were most likely meant for the home exterior. Whether it was a mastic paint application, aluminum siding, aluminum screen door and shutter installations or entire new facades, the work was visible from the street. Facade treatments were by far the primary locus of home improvement fraud. The chairman of the 1954 FHA investigation was curious about why this was the case and asked a local Better Business Bureau chief:

The CHAIRMAN. Do you know any reason why siding seems to be the most prevalent thing they would promote or sell, these chislers? We find more deals, bad deals, smelly deals, on siding than we do anything else.

Mr. CARRICO. I think the answer there is that the public probably is more gullible for that because they do want to improve their house, and siding does do it.

The CHAIRMAN. It improves the outward appearance if it?

Mr. CARRICO. Yes. And it gives them a chance to use the setup.

The CHAIRMAN. To use the model home setup?

Mr. CARRICO. Yes.⁵⁷

Remodeling scams involving siding required homeowners who had some interest in the way their house appeared among the rows of other homes on their street. Mastic paint and siding treatments were never just about reducing the frequency homeowners had to paint. Siding manufactured from space age materials promised an ever-new appearance in an era in which the aesthetic and cultural focus was on novelty. For the owners of existing homes, it was a shortcut to modernity. After aluminum siding was put on her house in the late 1950s, a Mrs. Kenneth Juice of Cincinnati gushed, "Everybody said that the house looks so different. I had people down the next street to me say, 'my goodness, Mrs. Juice, we thought you got a new house.'" With its pronounced horizontal shadow lines, aluminum siding also upgraded

⁵⁷ 1954 *FHA Investigation*, 2731.

the style of existing houses, visually stretching them to resemble contemporary house styles. Mrs. Juice continued, "Everybody says our house looks longer, more like a ranch type now than before"⁵⁸. Homeowner vanity was one of the currencies in which remodeling scammers traded. The model home pitch in particular depended in equal measure upon the homeowner's desire to have the newest finishes and materials adorning their homes and the homeowner's expectation that others navigating the neighborhood or led there by the dealer would appreciate the transformation and want it for their own dwelling.

Though the types of changes were often the same—new siding, porches and patios, the introduction of dormers and additions—exterior home improvement projects that turned out to be fraudulent could alter the residential landscape in ways that were significantly different from legitimate remodeling activities. First, the latter were finished projects. Whenever fraudulent work began there was always a distinct possibility that the project would not be seen to completion for any number of reasons—subcontractors quit when they were no longer paid by a salesman who had skipped town, the homeowner forced a cessation when they realized the terms to which they had agreed, or the swindler intentionally never came back after making a token start.

Swindlers could walk away from projects and still be paid in full if they had certificates of completion signed by the customer. The customer was supposed to sign the certificate only after all of the work described in the agreement was completed in its entirety and to the customer's satisfaction. Commonly, however, the swindler

⁵⁸ Kaiser Aluminum Siding, "Paint? Not Me," Audio Recording. (Cincinnati: Kaiser, 1960).

buried the certificate among other documents and had the customer sign it at the time they made the deal. On occasion, if the customer refused to sign them, the swindler forged them.⁵⁹ An alternative was to have the subcontractor foreman plead with the homeowner to sign the certificate after an initial amount of the project was done. The contractor would provide convincing assurances that they would finish and that he couldn't obtain pay for his workers (and they couldn't feed their families) until he had a signed certificate. All the scammer needed to discount paper with a bank was the signed loan application and signed certificate of completion. Banks routinely accepted certificates without checking with the homeowner to confirm the work was indeed finished.

When workers walked off a job site or the itinerant scammer fled, they rarely tidied up before doing so. The homes they leave feature tell tale building supplies scattered in the yard, tarps covering unfinished roofs, plywood over window openings where frames were taken out but not replaced, and dormers with exposed tar paper where siding was never installed (Figure 5.8). When the homeowner had the means to redress them, these conditions only temporarily affected the home's appearance. For marginal customers, whose savings and future earnings were already tied up in the previous project, they were not easily remedied. The disheveled appearance of their dwelling post-scam formed a sad contrast to their original intention of upgrading and improving it.

Remodeling projects seen through to completion by swindling contractors could often be easily spotted from the street. Hasty, unskilled work and shoddy

⁵⁹ *1954 FHA Investigation*, 655.

materials meant installations that deteriorated within a few years, months, or even weeks. One New Jersey couple told the Better Business Bureau of their travails after signing a contract for a mastic paint job. According to discussions with the dealer, the project was to take two full weeks including three days spent preparing the surface of their home for the paint application. The morning after they signed, a crew of two workers arrived and completed the project in a day and a half. The homeowner wrote, "We were promised that all cracks in our stucco house would be repaired, ivy removed from all walls, and many minor promises that were never fulfilled." He continued, "The main vines were torn off and the many remaining pieces of ivy were merely sprayed over. These pieces protrude as much as 2 inches in many areas. The job is so poor that it is unbelievable that we are being asked to pay for the job." In addition the problems with surface preparation, the company also bilked the customer on the paint used. "The color of the paint is not even as specified, nor is the brand of paint as specified in the contract. Two more men were sent out to redo the job. They spent a day and a half trying to patch up the job, which is still disgraceful."⁶⁰

Things were no better on the West Coast. Patios and barbecues, favorites of homeowners and scammers, were also constructed with fraudulently poor craftsmanship and materials. A Mrs. Hillegas from Pomona, California complained to investigators about a patio she and her husband purchased under the pretext it would serve as a model for others in the area. The day after they signed a contract (that did

⁶⁰ Ibid., 568. The *Saturday Evening Post*, reporting on home improvement scams described the results in one neighborhood. "Their materials and workmanship are so shoddy—they reroof a fair-sized house in an afternoon—that the property is turned into an eyesore." Frank, "Beware of Home-Repair Racketeers," 80.

not include the salesman's verbal promise that they would receive \$25 for each patio constructed in the neighborhood as a result of neighbors seeing theirs), workers came to install the patio. According to Hillegas, "the workmanship was terrible. Within a year it was completely falling apart. The firebricks would fall apart with your hand. You could lift the red brick topping off which wasn't tile as specified in the contract, it wasn't the specified size in the contract. It didn't have the foundation specified in the contract, and we had no \$25 bonuses of any type."⁶¹

A time in which new materials appeared on the market with increasing rapidity allowed swindlers unfettered creativity in asserting claims about their products and the surreptitious substitutions they made in what they actually installed after the deal was struck. Though its boosters promised mastic paint would look perpetually new while putting an end to regular repainting and maintenance, customers who purchased the treatment sometimes found it staining in a matter of days. The material also rapidly developed a reputation for discoloration, cracking, and mildew accumulation.⁶² The *Saturday Evening Post* claimed that when an unlucky homeowner "goes overboard for the spiel, his house presently starts to blister and peel like a third-degree sunburn."⁶³ Salesmen working for a Chicago company sold aluminum siding that turned out to be made of "a mixture of pressed fibers with an exterior covering of asphalt-like roofing substances."⁶⁴ The Columbus, Ohio Better Business Bureau put out a look out for a crew of itinerant painters who had worked the area around Columbus in June 1950.

⁶¹ 1954 *FHA Investigation*, 1731.

⁶² 1954 *FHA Investigation*, 485.

⁶³ Frank, "Beware of Home-Repair Racketeers", 82.

⁶⁴ 1954 *FHA Investigation*, 2362.

According to a bulletin, the aluminum paint they were using "had not dried in a week and the aluminum had turned brown."⁶⁵ Shifty contractors were known to use cheaper interior paint on exterior walls. Roof and driveway "tarring" treatments made with used lubricating oil and lamp black were flammable and ran off during the first rainfall killing grass and plantings.

The original, inflated cost of the fraudulent home improvement project and the long-term monthly payments assumed left customers without the financial resources (and in some cases the mental energy) to fix faulty workmanship, replace worthless material, or finish uncompleted tasks. Ongoing maintenance and repairs were a financial impossibility as any income above sustenance went to monthly payments to the bank. And there were few avenues through which to seek recourse. The smiling salesman had disappeared. The dealer-contractor was out of business. Manufacturers blamed improper installation and denied responsibility for the swindler's promises. Local subcontractors demanded compensation of their own by placing a mechanic's lien on the property.⁶⁶ Banks had no reservations about suing to collect on notes for work that demonstrably was never completed. They claimed they had bought the homeowner's loan in good faith and demanded prompt payment. If the homeowner defaulted and the bank passed the loan to the U. S. Government, as they were entitled to under Title I, the Justice Department could be an even more aggressive collector.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ "Warning on Itinerant Painters," *Better Business Bureau Bulletin*, 29:23 (June 28, 1950), 2.

⁶⁶ Subcontractors or material suppliers attached liens to a property when the original scammers fled with unpaid bills. Though only a portion were related to home improvement fraud, liens were placed on 28 percent of all new and remodeled homes in Los Angeles County during the first three months of 1956 alone. *1954 FHA Investigation*, 2758.

⁶⁷ Frank, "Beware of Home-Repair Racketeers," 83.

Even giving up and selling the house was not always a solution as the work might have devalued the house below market rate. Buffalo resident, Chester Murszewski, tried unsuccessfully to sell his house shortly after falling for a siding scam that resulted in "a mess of a job" in which, "the nails are coming out, the siding is cracked."

The new addition, aluminum siding, pool or patio that the customer thought they were getting on the cheap (or free) turned out to be more expensive than they imagined. Instead of transforming their house into an image of modernity and prosperity, it appeared the residence of a dupe. Instead of buttressing it as a durable investment to carry the owner into old age or to pass along to their children, it had been treated in ways that threatened its longevity. To those walking through the neighborhood, it was not a model to be admired and emulated, it was an eyesore.

Targeting Low-Income African-Americans

Swindlers had always targeted the easiest marks, whether rich or poor. Wealthy victims had more to sign over but they were also better connected and more likely to pursue legal actions to try to recoup their losses. The poor had less but were less likely to report fraudulent incidents, and less likely to prod authorities into action. In the 1960s and 70s, the targeting of low-income African-Americans, especially those who were elderly and living alone, seemed to increase precipitously. Dubious remodeling firms placed ads in black newspapers and directed sales calls to black neighborhoods. Newspaper reports told of one firm, Custom Houses Construction Company in Sliver Spring, Maryland, which gave its telephone salesgirls the "phone numbers of houses in low-income Negro areas selected from a cross-index file. They were told to hang up if

they judged a white person had answered."⁶⁸

Urban African-Americans experienced the home improvement trend in profoundly different ways than middle-class white Americans. From turn of the twentieth century efforts to clear slums and blight from American cities, home and community improvement was often code for racist social engineering intended to address the supposed moral failing of blacks, immigrants, and other urban poor, while largely ignoring (and in some cases perpetuating) ongoing inequality and the racial homogeneity of American communities.⁶⁹ After World War II, advocates of urban renewal in the US and abroad built on Modernist environmental determinist ideas and argued the need to clear deteriorated cityscapes and to replace them with rationalized, open, automobile oriented urban planning. To many American blacks, relocated and left few options for replacement housing, urban renewal became a sinister euphemism for "negro removal."⁷⁰ In the 1960s and 70s, white middle-class "urban homesteaders"

⁶⁸ Leonard Downie, Jr. and David A. Jewell, "Suit Hits Mortgage Abuses: Misled on Loan Terms, Claim Homeowners," *Washington Post*, October 2, 1967, A16.

⁶⁹ See: Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). For a survey of federal urban housing policy across postwar administrations, see: Roger Biles, *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011). Concerns about governmental programs that dispossessed black Americans were not limited to the cities. In his new book, Pete Daniel identifies federal policies that led to a precipitous drop in black farm ownership in the decades following World War II. Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

⁷⁰ Representative examinations of US urban renewal practices in Detroit, Chicago, and New York City, are presented, respectively, in: Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), and Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). The latter discusses the government-subsidized racism of postwar urban renewal and the desegregation of Stuyvesant Town development in Part II (pp. 73-156).

For a comparative analysis of urban renewal in the US and Europe, see chapter 2, "Assembling the Four Pillars: An Urban Renewal Order Takes Shape in the United States, 1934-1965," in Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism From New York to Berlin* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). The four transformative pillars that enabled the

undertook remodeling activities that gentrified historic neighborhoods raising property values and in some cases pushing out extant African-American communities.

Incidents of home improvement fraud perpetrated on low-income urban blacks began to attract media attention in the 1960s. The *Washington Post*, for example, published numerous investigative pieces throughout the decade on different home improvement swindlers at work in the city.⁷¹ The increased attention was due in part to the civil rights movement, a more prominent and assertive black press, and a general interest in consumer fraud, and a growing public awareness of the injustices of urban renewal. Scammers were attracted to African-American homeowners for two, in some ways contradictory, reasons. First, blacks were making economic gains including rising homeownership and credit availability. Between 1950 and 1960 the increase in the percentage of non-white (mostly black) homeowners rose faster than the percentage of white homeowners.⁷² The ability to borrow with a signature meant that lower-class homeowners were now worth the swindler's effort. On the other hand, the ongoing discriminatory practices of many banks left swaths of poor blacks unable to obtain lines of credit for home improvements and purchases. When legitimate banks wouldn't lend, poor consumers were more likely to accept credit from dubious sources under dubious terms.

advancement of urban renewal are 1) the embrace of modernist urban design by mainstream tastes, 2) the professionalization of urban planning, 3) marshaling government funding and urban-oriented policy, and 4) the securing of local power by reformists.

⁷¹ Post staff writers Leonard Downie Jr. and David Jewell wrote the majority of these articles. Cases included Custom Home Construction Company, accused of tricking homeowners into signing second mortgages as collateral for overpriced home improvement work, intercom and alarm scams, and the Monarch Construction swindle discussed below.

⁷² Though the black population was starting at a much lower level and remained at a much smaller percentage than that of the white population." Note Faster Rise Among Negro Home Owners," *Jet* (May 18, 1961): 10.

That the African-American-owned home was a primary object of the unscrupulous salesmen and shifty remodeler was not without cruel irony. For while most Americans considered the single-family home a potent symbol of security and comfort, this was especially the case among blacks. Some authorities at the time asserted that low-income African-Americans were more likely to fall for scams because they were especially eager to acquire symbols of dignity, and economic and social ascent, behavior described as "compensatory consumption."⁷³ Home was a place that was supposed to be free of discrimination, where blacks could sit where they wanted, eat where they wanted, and relax without hassle, proscription, or reminder of their marginalized status. In 1962 the magazine *Negro Digest* published an exchange of letters between a white developer who was having a hard time convincing blacks to move to his new suburb and Alice Reid, a black woman from Berkeley, California. Reid wrote, "Every time that you see your blackness mirrored in the blankness of a white man's stare, you are glad that you can go away from him and everything he stands for, away from him and back to your own kind where you can relax and lick your wounds and listen to the comforting sounds of frying fat, dialect, easy laughter and race music coming over a radio."⁷⁴ Remodeling scams that left homes in worse shape than before and that threatened their owners with penury and foreclosure undermined the meaning of home that white Americans took for granted.

⁷³ Warren G. Magnuson, "How the Ghetto Gets Gypped," *Ebony* (September 1968), 112. The co-author, US Senator Warren Magnuson, observed that, "Decidedly, those who specialize in selling to the poor are astute students of the psychological and sociological implications of what it means to be impoverished in today's affluent society." Magnuson was chair of the Committee on Commerce in the late 1960s and devoted a lot of attention, through hearings and proposed legislation, to home improvement and other types of consumer fraud. He co-authoring a book titled *The Dark Side of the Marketplace* from which this article was excerpted.

⁷⁴ Alice Reid, "'Yes, We Are Afraid,'" *Negro Digest* (October 1962): 11.

Home improvement fraud in urban black neighborhoods assumed many of the same forms seen in white suburban communities. In addition to the model home scams, bait-and-switch scams, fraudulently negligent installations, and referral schemes that poor blacks encountered was the seemingly pervasive practice of overcharging. Televisions, clothes washers, and improvement work cost more in African-American neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods. Researchers in the 1960s found that stores serving black housewives charged up to 60 percent more for appliances and other large home purchases than stores frequented by white law students.⁷⁵ Swindlers targeting impoverished urban communities added another pair of insidious ingredient to their pitches: urgency and fear. Pitches played upon concerns among black homeowners over losing their most valuable possession and primary investment. There was widespread, and often justified fears among postwar urban African-Americans of the federal and local renewal programs that were gobbling up marginal communities and replacing them with civic centers, upper class housing, and parking lots. Many knew relatives and friends who's property had been seized and who had been displaced somewhere worse. Remodeling promoters parlayed these fears into urgent calls to improve black neighborhoods so that redevelopment agencies would not earmark them for renewal. Other anxieties could accompany home improvement purchased on credit. In some states those who borrowed could easily lose their homes if monthly bills were not settled promptly. Pennsylvanian lenders, for example, were entitled to attach a "confession of judgment" clause to any promissory note. If even a single payment was missed the lender could initiate auction proceedings with the local

⁷⁵ Magnuson, "How the Ghetto Gets Gypped," 113.

sheriff. Because the loan collateral was often a house, every month it was at risk of seizure.

Perhaps the most extensive and widely-publicized postwar scam targeting lower-income African-Americans, took place between 1963 and 1965 in Washington, DC.⁷⁶ There Monarch Construction Corporation, led by a young spendthrift lawyer named Nathan Cohen, bilked approximately 700 Washingtonians of over \$4 million with facade program touted as a private route to revitalizing deteriorated nineteenth century row houses.⁷⁷ Treatments were purchased on credit, with "so much shuffling and signing of papers" that homeowners only later learned the actual amount they owed (and secured with a deed of trust) was thousands of dollars more than the work was worth or they had originally agreed to pay. The *Washington Post* newspaper covered Monarch's scam extensively but warnings also spread via word-of-mouth through the neighborhoods where the firm operated.⁷⁸ According to the *Post*, Cohen's practices were so well known that "you've been Monarched" replaced the phrase

⁷⁶ The nation's capital was apparently an epicenter of housing scams in the 1960s. The *Washington Post* reported in 1967 that low-income black residents had filed more than 100 suits accusing various home improvement firms in the District of fraudulently obtaining second mortgages on their homes. Authorities said the scams net more than \$1 million per year. Victims included the blind, cleaning ladies, and retired couples. Leonard Downie Jr. and David A Jewell, "Homeowners Lose Millions in Mortgage Schemes Here," *Washington Post*, September 30, 1967, A1. As in other examples of home improvement fraud, legitimate banks facilitated many of these swindles by buying loans from fraudulent contractors and salesmen without checking that the work was performed or performed correctly. See: Leonard Downie Jr. and David A. Jewell, "Large Firm Bankrolls Trust Deals," *Washington Post*, October 6, 1967, A1.

⁷⁷ The \$2.4 million figure is from: Leonard Downie Jr. and David A. Jewell, "City Hit for 'Slowness' in Probe of Mortgages," *Washington Post* (October 3, 1967), A1. However, Jan Carper, author of a book on the Monarch scam placed the figure much higher. Jean Carper, *Not with a Gun* (New York: Grossman, 1973), 104.

⁷⁸ "Probation Revoked in Fraud Case," *Washington Post*, February 26, 1976, F1.

"you've been had."⁷⁹

Besides Cohen, Monarch consisted of a team of salesmen and dynamiters, many of whom had prior fraud convictions, which hit lower and middle class black neighborhoods in the District, pushing what it called the "American Towne House Program" (Figure 5.9). Monarch packaged the facade treatment in various combinations. Most included installing white aluminum siding across the entire front facade (or alternately, staining the first floor brick facade and placing siding on the second floor), replacing large windows with multi-light sash, reducing the size of the main door opening, adding a heavy door and Colonial style trim, and in some cases, concrete porch and steps. Other tacked on accessories completed the treatment including black aluminum shutters, wrought iron wall lantern lights, wrought iron rails, and pickets.⁸⁰ The most basic treatment involved new siding and a front door.

The appeal of Monarch's Towne House front was attributable not only to its fast (if superficial) updating of Victorian-era facade that were considered out of fashion in the 1960s, nor the persuasiveness of the experienced swindling salesmen alone. Cohen's nefarious genius was to present the work as both a counter to, and affiliated with Federal urban renewal programs. By the early 1960s, black urban homeowners had well-founded fears that governmental redevelopment programs would designate their neighborhoods as blighted slums and target their residences for

⁷⁹ Leonard Downie Jr. and David A. Jewell, "Firm Duped Them, Say Residents," *Washington Post* (1967).

⁸⁰ Carper, *Not with a Gun*, 20. Essentially the treatments attempted to conceal out of style nineteenth century features (one-over-one sash and tall openings with arched lintels), decorative brickwork) with Colonial era features that resembled eighteenth century row houses in the revitalized and now fashionable neighborhoods of Georgetown and Capitol Hill.

demolition. Cohen's advertisements boasted that the American Towne House was "a private urban renewal program not affiliated with the Federal or DC Governments."⁸¹ Ads running in the *Post*, the *Washington Daily News*, and the *Washington Afro-American* compared the facade treatments to recent revitalization efforts in Georgetown and Capitol Hill that raised home values and attracted buyers. It contrasted these renewal efforts with governmental programs that displaced businesses and homeowners, destroyed communities, and rebuilt fewer housing units than they demolished. The Monarch promotional literature suggested that by purchasing the facade improvement, their homes would not be seized as part of a government redevelopment project. When speaking with potential customers, Monarch salesmen likewise promised that the customer's house would not be torn down. But the salesmen made this claim not as though the company were protecting the homeowner from the government's reach but under the guise that he was a "representative of urban renewal" and that the Towne House facade was an officially administered alternative to condemnation and relocation.⁸²

Monarch stated that the firm would help Washingtonians of modest incomes

⁸¹ Monarch Construction Corporation, "Washington Has a Choice: Urban Renewal or Urban Removal?" Advertisement. *Washington Post*, January 11, 1965, B8. See also: Monarch Construction Corporation, "How Much Do You Really Know About the Economics of Urban Renewal?" *Washington Post*, February 1, 1965, A7.

⁸² Downie and Jewell, "Firm Duped Them, Say Residents," A7. According to the story, "The homeowners said that Monarch's telephone solicitation, sprinkled heavily with references to 'urban renewal' and 'talking to you about schedules for your property and your street,' led them to believe the Government was somehow behind it." Cohen furthered the impression that Monarch was, if not an official arm of the government, at least connected to its leaders and other leaders in the black community by publishing letters from Senators, Congressmen and ministers as endorsements in advertisements and mentioning them in sales calls as program backers. Carper, *Not with a Gun*, 89.

"regain pride in their homes."⁸³ In fact, many were disappointed in the quality of the work and ashamed they had fallen for the scam. Journalists said the facades looked attractive from a distance and in photographs, but customers complained that the work was shoddy and many were complaining of deterioration within a year of the installation.⁸⁴ But the primary aim of Monarch's scam was not to rip off lower class blacks with substandard remodeling work. Instead it was to obtain signatures on second mortgages and certificates of completion for those overpriced and poor quality home alterations. After obtaining signatures through coercion, deceit, and forgery, Cohen's company then sold the initial loan to a finance agency that he also had a stake in. The new holder of the paper would then either collect the monthly payments or foreclose and flip the house when the borrower defaulted.⁸⁵

Complaints about Monarch's practices began to grow in 1964 and the jig was mostly up by 1965; Cohen fled the Washington area early the following year to start a computer training school in Baltimore. He was named as the defendant in more than twenty-five civil suits. In an attempt to stymie a Justice Department investigation, Cohen paid a \$25,000 bribe to Texas Congressman John Dowdy. It took six more years for Cohen and his partners to plead guilty and be convicted (of one count of mail fraud). Dowdy retired from Congress in 1973 while under a bribery indictment.

⁸³ Monarch Construction Corporation, *Washington Has a Choice*, B8.

⁸⁴ One homeowner described the site after Monarch laborers left, "cement splashed on the front door, rags and other refuse left on the front lawn, sticky windows, a loose lamp." Downie and Jewell, "Firm Duped Them, Say Residents," A7.

⁸⁵ And lenders could initiate the process of foreclosure after a single missed payment. Leonard Downie Jr. and David A. Jewell, "Foreclosure Often Swift Process Here," *Washington Post*, October 7, 1967, A1.

Around 190 of Monarch's victims eventually received about \$250 each in restitution.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Between 1954 and 1956, the FHA expanded its precautionary list from a total of 3,000 names before the investigation to more than 5,000.⁸⁷ During the same period, the Justice Department obtained 450 convictions and 890 indictments for home repair rackets.⁸⁸ The Federal Government also reduced its coverage of Title I home improvement loans from 100% to 90%. This prompted banks to examine more closely the reputation of the remodeling firms from which they were buying paper and the credit-worthiness of the customers to which they were lending. In the immediate aftermath of hearings, trade groups and publishers with a stake in the remodeling industry rallied to defend the FHA's lending programs. Fearing a slowdown in construction prompted by a withdrawal of Federal support, *American Lumberman* editor Art Hood asked his subscribers to write to Congress requesting their representatives to keep in perspective the low number of dynamiters and FHA fraudsters (a fraction of 1% according to Hood), and to affirm the importance of the remodeling initiative to their community.⁸⁹

From the 1950s into the 1960s and 70s home improvement swindling

⁸⁶ "Victims of Fraud to Get \$256 Each," *Washington Post*, June 29, 1974, B8. In 1974 Cohen's parole was revoked and he was jailed again for obtaining a false Colombian passport and making unauthorized gambling trips to the Bahamas. "Probation Revoked in Fraud Case," *Washington Post*, February 28, 1976, F1.

⁸⁷ Frank, "Beware of Home-Repair Racketeers," 83. The precautionary list was a list of companies about which complaints were received and which required banks to witness contract signings and inspect every third job for under \$500 and every job that cost more than \$1,000. Additional figures on the FHA response to remodeling fraud at the time can be found in: David G. Bareuther, "Sharp Operators Swindle Many Unwary Homeowners," *Lebanon [Pa.] Daily News*, January 25, 1955, 14.

⁸⁸ Quoted in: Nash, *Residential Rehabilitation*, 49.

⁸⁹ Art Hood, "Editorial: Here's How We Can Help Save FHA," *American Lumberman* (May 31, 1954): 17.

continued to be a primary area of consumer fraud (Figure 5.10), but the period also saw a concurrent rise of more robust laws and vigorous efforts to protect consumers throughout the American economy and within the home improvement market in particular.⁹⁰ It was a time of rising consumer consciousness and the advent of consumer advocacy. A flood of books and magazine articles alerting consumers to the techniques practiced by scammers appeared during this time. The American marketplace was revealed to have a "dark side" and consumers' position within it a "plight."⁹¹

In 1962, the Federal Trade Commission issued its Trade Practice Rules for the Residential Aluminum Siding Industry, developed in cooperation with the Aluminum Siding Association.⁹² The FTC and the Postal Service began cracking down on referral selling schemes around 1963. Over the following decade they ran hundreds of shady dealers out of business and obtained convictions for 77 others.⁹³ In March 1968 the U. S. Senate Committee on Commerce conducted two sets of hearings that involved home improvement fraud. The first, on door-to-door selling, examined proposals to institute a several day "cooling off period" in which customers could back out of

⁹⁰ Most books had chapters on home improvement fraud. See, for example: Joe Cartwright and Jerry Patterson, *Been Taken Lately? The Comprehensive Consumer Fraud Digest* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), *Pros and Cons: Incredible True Tales About Famous Con Men, Frauds, Hoaxers, and Beguiling Swindlers*, ed. Art Moger (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1975), and Carey and Sherman, *A Compendium of Bunk*, 1976).

⁹¹ Warren Grant Magnuson and Jean Carper, *The Dark Side of the Marketplace: The Plight of the American Consumer* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

⁹² Among the trade practices deemed unfair in the rules were model home pitches, bait advertising, and promises that aluminum siding and its finish was indestructible and never required painting. *Federal Trade Commission, Trade Practice Rules for the Aluminum Siding Industry*, Promulgated April 6, 1962 (Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, 1962).

⁹³ "Watch Out for the Referral Sales Scheme," *Changing Times* (September 1972): 13-14.

agreements made at their residence (which eventually made it into law).⁹⁴ The second hearings, on "Unfair Practices in the Home Improvement Industry," found that domestic remodeling continued to be a hotbed of swindling and fraud; the committee discussed three anti-fraud bills enabling the FTC to move more quickly against fraudulent home improvement operators.⁹⁵ In the 1970s, California and other states passed laws requiring home improvement salesmen contacting customers door-to-door or by telephone to register with the Contractors' State License Board.⁹⁶

A 1974 episode of the ABC television sitcom *All in the Family*, neatly tied up several home improvement fraud scams that had developed over the previous two decades and demonstrated that they remained a problem at the time.⁹⁷ Titled "Archie's Contract," the episode featured a visit by a self-identified furnace inspector with the vague affiliation with a vague federal agency at the Queens, New York home of Archie and Edith Bunker. After a fake energy audit (conducted with a photographic light meter) that reveals heat leakage near the windows, the inspector, Mr. Scanlon, investigates the furnace and tags it as dangerous. An alternative to the \$2,500 replacement furnace is a complete aluminum siding package that Scanlon is willing to sell to the Bunkers. Archie leaps at the deal when told it will be free (minus installation costs) and likely to generate commissions if he touts its benefits to the

⁹⁴ *Door-to-door Sales Regulation. Hearings before the consumer subcommittee of the committee on commerce; Ninetieth Congress, Second Session on S. 1599* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1968). Some home improvement companies such as APCO Aluminum Products, Inc., of Akron, Ohio, unsuccessfully lobbied for exempting home improvements from the proposed law. See pp. 308, 318.

⁹⁵ "Unfair Practices in the Home Improvement Industry and Amendments to the FTC Act," *Hearing before the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate, Ninetieth Congress, Second Session* (1968).

⁹⁶ "Home Improvement Salesman," *News Bulletin - State of California Department of Consumer Affairs* (1974).

⁹⁷ The episode, titled "Archie's Contract," first aired on December 7, 1974 (Season 5, Episode 13).

neighbors (Figure 5.11). The episode, which could have been written by a Better Business Bureau office, is a prime example of how swindlers adapted older pitches to current cultural and economic concerns. Here, two years after the onset of the 1970s energy crisis, the overriding consumer concern was how to beat heating bills.

While swindlers were still able to find marks that enabled their remodeling scams a healthy life, they had to move faster and hit ever more marginalized portions of the population. Since the rise of consumer credit in the 1950s fraudsters had targeted those with lower incomes and education. By the 1980s, the mass media increasingly presented the home improvement fraud alongside insurance and charity fraud as a threat especially to the elderly. The American Association of Retired Persons' member magazine, *Modern Maturity*, frequently featured articles warning its member of various home improvement scams. Elderly customers drew swindlers because the former were often more trusting, less mobile and thus more dependent upon salesmen who came to their homes. On fixed incomes, they were "house rich but cash poor" and so were eager for low-cost home improvement solutions.⁹⁸

Home improvement swindling has continued into recent decades. In 1998, the U.S. House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity held hearings entitled "Consumer Abuses in Home Improvement Financing." The hearing investigated how the Department of Housing and Urban Development failed to properly oversee the Title I home improvement program allowing greedy and fraudulent contractors (with the abetment of banks) to swindle

⁹⁸ Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity, Committee on Banking and Financial Services and U.S. House of Representatives, "Consumer Abuses in Home Improvement Financing" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998).

homeowners, especially the elderly and those with low-incomes. The complaints were reminiscent of the 1954 hearings—shoddy work with low-quality materials, overcharging (sometimes double or triple the prevailing costs), and missing contractors and salespeople when problems arise.⁹⁹ By this time any tradesperson soliciting business door-to-door was considered suspicious. *Modern Maturity* cautioned, "Never hire a contractor who knocks on your door and asks for business. Legitimate contractors simply don't operate that way."¹⁰⁰

This chapter has demonstrated the prevalence of home improvement fraud during the early postwar years. The heyday of the door-to-door remodeling swindler coincided with the rise of alternative forms of remodeling consumption. During the 1960s and 1970s consumers began to redirect their purchasing power away from in-home shopping models.¹⁰¹ They purchased remodeling less and less frequently in response to informal direct appeals and looked for other sources for home improvement goods and services. Yet the question remains whether the two phenomena were related, whether the mistrust and suspicion engendered by home improvement fraud contributed to larger shifts in the remodeling market that began at

⁹⁹ Ibid.

As in the past the effects of such scams were both emotional and physical. One homeowner from Pennsylvania stated that contractors had walked off the job because their contractor (who had made the deal with the homeowner) filed for bankruptcy after cashing her home improvement loan checks. "They came to our house. They started the work. They ripped apart my entire house, and I mean my entire house, and finished nothing. I had gaping holes in my wall. I had an 8-by-8 hole in my wall in my kitchen that was plywood that was supposed to be French doors. I had a boarded bathroom window, a boarded bedroom window. I had a tarp on my roof, no siding." The homeowner, Ms. Christine Harris, continued, "My sons are humiliated. I mean, I have a 16- and 14-year old. We did this so they could have their own bedrooms. They cannot even bring their friends home."

Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁰ Douglas P. Shadel, "Beware the Home-Repair Swindle," *Modern Maturity* (Jan-Feb 1995): 76.

¹⁰¹ As late as 1963, door-to-door selling remained the third most common source for the goods Americans bought (after retail and mail order houses). "Salesman at the door," *Changing Times* (August 1963), 25.

the time and accelerated in the years ahead. Did an increasingly suspicious consumer public, stung by independent swindlers, decide to take on more of the work of upgrading their homes themselves? Did home improvement fraud push consumers to the relative security of well-known retail names?

The increasing coverage of home improvement scams would seem to have prompted an increasing wariness on the part of the public that turned to, or proved receptive to, other means of consuming home improvement. The concurrent ascent of new remodeling practices such as Do-It-Yourself and in new retail models such as the home improvement center seem to suggest this was the case. Large home improvement centers with their self-service orientation and shortage of sales staff, would seem to have appealed to customers wary of the one-on-one sales situations where fraudulent pitches were usually encountered. The national reputation of many of these firms would also seem to attract those who had read of fly-by-night operators and were reluctant to trust unknown companies and individuals.

The redirection of consumption preferences away from itinerant workmen and door-to-door salesmen and towards more known, established retail outlets can also be seen as an exertion upon the home improvement market of what legal scholars have called "extra-judicial consumer pressure." The term refers to the options available to fraud victims who are not able to, or choose not to file lawsuits or report to governmental officials. Such pressure was typically enacted through picketing, boycotting, and educating other consumers about bad experiences (in a variety of venues from letters to neighborhood legal clinics). According to the authors, "Direct action might provide swift private and public vindication and could result in remedial

gestures by the offending merchant. Consumer action might also serve as a psychological release for an offended consumer's animosity and frustration," which are often increased when reliance is placed on legal action or governmental intervention."¹⁰²

Witnessing governmental failure in stamping out home improvement fraud, hearing that the courts favored banks and companies demanding payment for shoddy or uncompleted work, it is no surprise that consumers exerted "extra-judicial consumer pressure" on the remodeling market by relocating their purchasing power to the relative security of a Montgomery Ward remodeling center. In time, manufacturers acknowledged this pressure, worked more diligently to clean up the installation end of their business and welcomed the legitimate retail dealer as a wholesome face to greet and guide the consumer.

These questions regarding the postwar consumer's response to home improvement fraud, and their opinions and actions regarding remodeling consumption are crucially important to the study of the house as an ever-evolving site of identity-expression. Our understanding of the consumer's role in home improvement swindles is expanded enormously through the testimony provided by the homeowners at the 1954 congressional hearings. Their verbatim transcripts provide insights into what they wanted out of home improvement, what arguments swayed them, and, in some case, what drove them into cahoots with criminals. While the record includes sometime disturbingly degrees of swindler-homeowner collaboration, they also reveal

¹⁰² "Extrajudicial Consumer Pressure: An Effective Impediment to Unethical Business Practices," *Duke Law Journal* 1969, no. 5 (1969): 1015.

a growing sense of power that foreshadows the rise of the 1970s consumer movement.

It also shows the deep desire postwar Americans had to fix up their homes, connect them to contemporary ideas, and present them as places for which they could be proud. For some, fulfilling that desire was worth almost any compromise.



Figure 5.1. In 1951 the Association of Better Business Bureaus printed the poster above for distribution to branch bureaus across the United States. It warned of the common pitches made by home improvement swindlers.

Source: Better Business Bureau Records



Figure 5.2. Plastic resin-based mastic paints and other “magic” coatings introduced or reintroduced in the postwar era were a common product used in dubious sales presentations. The primary tool of mastic paint application, the pressure spray gun, allowed applicators to paint an entire home in a single day.

Source: John L. Springer, “How Some Painters Rook Homeowners.” *Popular Science* (March 1955), 135.



Figure 5.3. The Williamson family, consisting of approximately 200 individuals, traveled around the country selling cheap, mass-produced products and dubious home repair and improvement services. Women passed off machine-made rugs as handmade. Men tricked homeowners into unnecessary roof repairs and paint jobs using adulterated materials. Here, police inspect a truck and paint trailer seized from members of the family.

Source: John Kobler, "The Terrible Williamsons." *Saturday Evening Post*, (27 October 1956), 27.

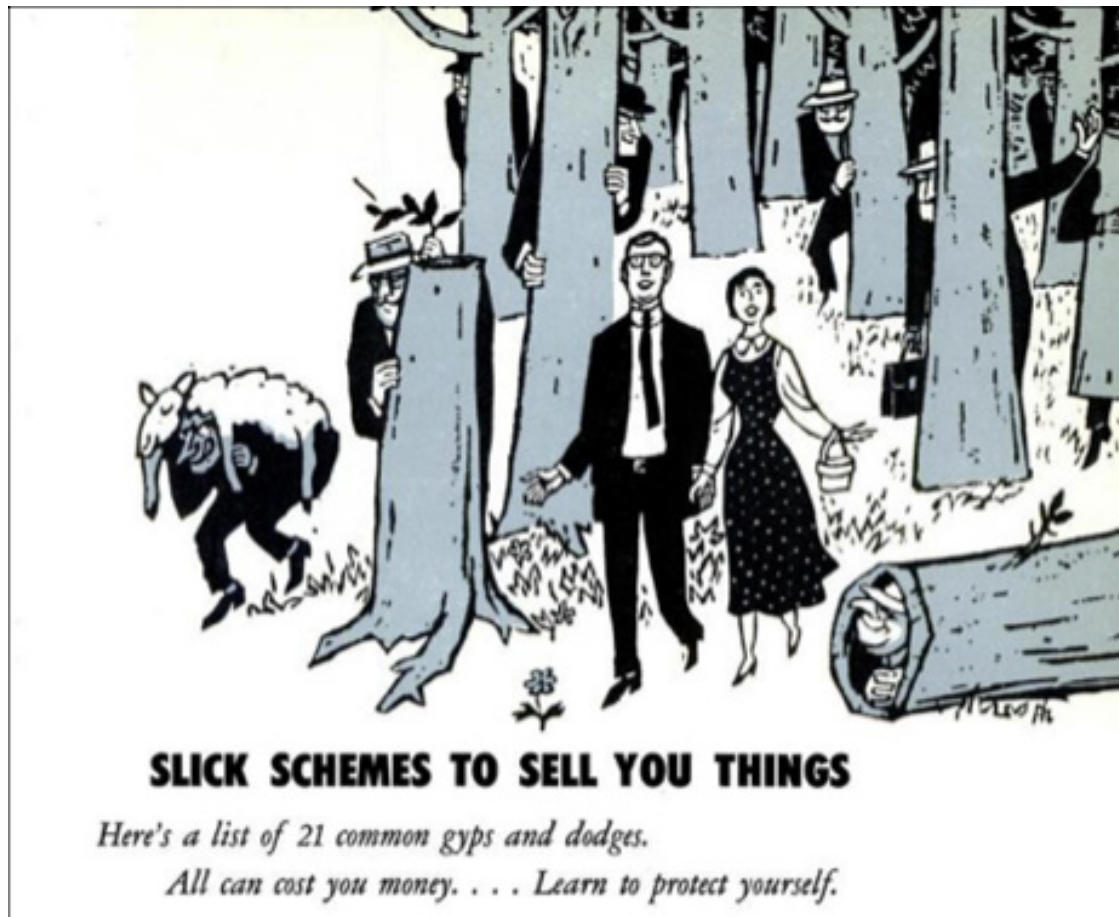


Figure 5.4. The magazine *Changing Times* depicted the homeownership couple as innocents lost in a forest of swindlers, gyys, and wolves in sheep's clothing. While many of those defrauded were taken through their own unawareness of the true nature of what they were signing and getting, others let their avarice get the better of them and bent into wishful thinking at best, and collusion at worse.

Source: "Slick Schemes to Sell You Things." *Changing Times: The Kiplinger Magazine*, (September 1956), 7.



Figure 5.5. A still image from the 1987 Barry Levinson film *Tin Men*. Richard Dreyfuss and John Mahoney play aluminum siding salesmen in early 1960s Baltimore. In this scene they set up a camera to take a “before” photo of the housewife’s home. Their pitch claims that the photo will appear in *Life* magazine alongside an “after” photo of a similar house down the street with new siding. The housewife, of course, does not want her unimproved house featured in *Life* and so pleads with the salesmen to sell her siding. Home improvement promised to transform homeowner, made famous by national magazine exposure, as well as house.

Source: Film. *Tin Men*. 1987. Touchstone Pictures. Barry Levinson, dir.



Figure 5.7. Fatigue and sleepiness were persuasive selling tools often employed by swindling closers. Sales pitches could continue until the early morning hours as the seller gradually wore down the mark. During late night return visits, the swindler surreptitiously swapped legitimate contracts signed earlier with fraudulent ones, signed “agreements” with second mortgages.

Source: *Salesman's Opportunity*, (September 1969): 40.



Figure 5.8. An unfinished dormer is left exposed to the elements by fly-by-night operators. A still image from a 1964 consumer protection film on home improvement scams by the Association for Better Business Bureaus.

Source: Film. *A House Is a Living Thing*. New York: Association of Better Business Bureaus, 1964.



THE Washington Post
LOST—This house at 329 V st. ne, belonged to Norwood Thompson in the morning and someone else that night.



By Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post
JEOPARDY—Mrs. Clarence Winters in front of the Park Street home she could lose after signing Monarch contract.

Figure 5.9. Photos that ran in the *Washington Post* coverage of the Monarch Construction Company scams. Both illustrate the “American Townhouse Front” treatment consisting of aluminum siding, and Colonial Revival-esque door pilasters and broken pediments.

Source: (Left) Downie, Leonard and David A Jewell. “Foreclosure Often Swift Process Here.” *Washington Post*, October 7, 1967, A15. (Right) Downie, Leonard Jr. and David A Jewell. “Firm Duped Them, Say Residents.” *Washington Post*, October 1, 1967, A7.



Figure 5.10. Though the illustration style changed over the decades (here a Yellow Submarine/hieroglyphic look), the message is clear: homeowners should be wary of flamboyantly dressed siding salesman, contract in pocket.

Source: "Need New Siding for Your House? A Few Words of Caution About Dealers, Contracts, Guarantees." *Good Housekeeping*, (May 1973), 6.



Figure 5.11. Archie Bunker (Carol O'Connor) signs a contract for aluminum siding as his devoted wife Edith (Jean Stapleton) looks on with concern. From a 1974 episode of the ABC television network's sitcom *All in the Family*.

Source: Norman Lear, *All in the Family*, "Archie's Contract," Carol O'Connor and Jean Stapleton, Season 5, Episode 13. ABC Television, December 7, 1974. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFQuflnCo7U>, accessed May 12, 2013.

CONCLUSION

This work has sought to interpret the main rhetorical arguments that promoters used to encourage remodeling consumption in the postwar era. It identifies how advocates of home modification coopted themes prevalent in popular American culture when developing those arguments. Patriotism and duty to community and family called for the upgrading of one's living space. Reworkings of the human body and psyche offered models for reworking the house that enclosed them. The movement toward greater consumer freedom and authority positioned remodeling as an easily designed and accomplished task, but the deskilling of home improvement also left consumers susceptible to swindlers and dubious dealers. In a mass culture, in mass-produced houses, homeowner's sought individuality through the customization of their dwellings.

Connections between Past and Present

The postwar promotional practices discussed here are still recognizable in the contemporary rhetoric of home improvement. Although cultural priorities have evolved since the 1950s and 60s, boosters continue to market remodeling through pitches asserting a homeowner's duty to family and nation, buyer autonomy and personalization, associations with the body, appeals to the senses, and the promise (and risk) of the unbeatable deal. Tracing the articulation of these pitches back to their foundations, confirms that present selling proposals are rarely as novel or revolutionary as their promoters suggest.

Over the past two decades Americans have returned to the symbolic comfort and security of the single-family house in ways that resemble the early postwar era. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, under threat of dirty bombs and anthrax, the home again assumed especially strong symbolic meanings as a place of refuge from a dangerous outside world. As in the past, the government charged individual homeowners with responsibility for their own protection and security. Duct tape and plastic sheeting sold out of home stores. The growing popularity of home entertainment centers, home theaters, and personal computers that was well underway before 9/11 accelerated after the attacks as a new generation of parents turned to homes stocked with electronic media for both seclusion and escape.¹

Home computers, the internet, and console video games brought digital representations of the outside world safely into the home. In this new realm users could also undertake all kinds of virtual remodeling projects without the risks that accompanied actual physical intervention. Games like the hugely popular "Sims" franchise allow players to design and redesign ad infinitum the homes of their dreams and observe them occupied by simulated human characters at no more expense than the cost of the game. In once sense games from this series reinforce ideologies of consumption in which players shape their "dream house" through copious consumption. However, scholars have also pointed out that the virtual work game

¹ Rose Kundanis attributes the turn of Generation Xers (born between 1960 and 1980) toward digital technology in the home to feelings (originally arising during their youths) that their baby boomer parents' generation had lost control of the world outside, from Three Mile Island to the Challenger disaster. Media access and media exposure defined this generation as the first to grow up with video games, PCs and other technologies that allowed for interaction within the comforts of home. Rose M. Kundanis, *Children, Teens, Families, and Mass Media: The Millennial Generation* (Mahwah, NJ: Taylor & Francis-Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 39-41.

characters are required to undergo to "purchase" such homes can lead to a critique of consumption.²

Design-it-yourself programs embedded in the websites of Ikea and The Home Depot have superseded miniature kitchen design kits. Virtual clipping of ideas and products and the placement of these items in personal folders allow homeowners to shop and design from the comfort of their PCs. Software such as "Home Design Studio" allows users to "plan and visualize decorating projects, remodeling, room additions, updates to your landscape, or even the dream house you've always wanted."³

There is no site in contemporary American media where the home as a transformable and transformative object has received more attention than on cable television programs. On channels such as HGTV (Home and Garden Television), TLC, and DIY Network, viewers can catch new or repeat airings of *Renovation Nation*, *Rip & Renew*, *Bang For Your Buck*, *Designed to Sell* and *Design on a Dime*. These and other shows are offspring of the PBS series *This Old House*, which beginning in 1979 with host Bob Vila followed the step-by-step renovation of existing homes. Today, producers typically frame these "how-to" programs with tension-building criteria such as the need to complete a project on a limited budget or in a limited period of time.

The ABC network series, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, was undoubtedly

² Mary Flanagan, for example, has written that "In some scenarios [in *The Sims*], the game might encourage players to question whether their characters would be happier with bigger, better items and houses, for the tasks necessary to acquire increase exponentially with possessions a character has." Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 54.

³ Home Design Studio, Encore Software, Inc., Apple App Store, accessed 12 May 2013.

the most watched renovation television series since *This Old House*. Broadcast between 2004 and 2012, each episode featured a team of builders who reworked the existing home of a family which had endured some sort of tragedy. Gareth Palmer notes that the viewer is “reminded that this transformation is also a reward—it is because people have held the family together in very difficult situations that they deserve this home. In clips and segments that remind us of the past, we are moved to see that these people have got what they deserve.”⁴ The show also drew upon themes and traditions identified above as enmeshed in both American culture and remodeling promotion. As a spin-off of an earlier ABC program that followed plastic surgery patients through their procedure, *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* likewise celebrated the power of personal renewal that often started with physical appearance. Updating the visual convention of before-and-after photography, it dramatized home improvement's transformative potential by slowly revealing to owner and audience the completely remodeled home from behind a bus.

Avenues for Future Research

To examine the history of home improvement is to see buildings as mutable artifacts. The study of remodeling extends authorship beyond the trained designer to include other professionals and other trades—some, such as advertising and motivational psychology, which have no connection to T-square or two-by-four. Examining change

⁴ Gareth Palmer, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition: An American Fairy Tale," in *Makeover Television: Realities Remodeled*, ed. Dana Heller (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2007), 168.

Frequently the show “starred” a family with an ill child or a parent from law enforcement, paralyzed in the line of duty and in need of accessibility adaptations to their home. It is important to point out, however, that these programs generally depicted the subject parents as helpless, either through poverty or misfortune, and unable to provide appropriate improvements for themselves and their children. Instead, corporations become the prominent providers.

within the dwelling prompts examination of where laws governing that change are subverted, to understand the behaviors of swindlers and their marks. Most of all, to study remodeling one needs to acknowledge homeowners as active shapers of the built environment. Such approaches consider buildings as settings that are both shaped by and giving shape to ever-shifting human relationships rather than as immutable and fixed works of art that exist in a vacuum of occupation.

This work focuses on the framing of promotional messages directed toward homeowners, but much remains unknown about how those messages were received and interpreted. Postwar consumer surveys rarely asked the types of questions that would reveal how owners and occupants acted or failed to act on promotional exhortations. Raw data from such surveys, or from the investigations of motivational researchers, are rare among archival materials. The final chapter of this work points to one possible type of sources, legal testimony, which has been underutilized by architectural historians. Property disputes, liens, civil suits against contractors, as well as a range of other court records (some including witness testimony) may provide valuable insights into the ways homeowner responded to calls for improvement and functioned as agents of architectural change. Greater attention to buildings as material culture constantly undergoing change and with a broad range of individuals enacting that change, deepens our understanding of architectural design and history.

Because this dissertation covers the postwar period through only the 1960s, a gap exists between the promotional practices I examine and those in use today. Although in the various chapters I suggest some of the consistencies and discrepancies between then and now, there is much to be learned about the interstitial period. At the

retail level, the 1970s to the early 2000s saw the maturation of the home improvement center and its evolution into the big box home improvement store as operated by The Home Depot, Lowe's and others. Starting with the discounters that began work in the 1960s, home store chains codified remodeling promotion with a focus on low prices. While other appeals occasionally figure into the home center's pitches—patriotism, duty to provide for the family—the promise of low costs dominates the market today.

Postwar promoters argued that remodeling was a vote of confidence in the future, a means for owners of older houses to buy into the up-to-date looks and up-to-date attitudes characteristic of new housing and contemporary culture. Remodeling was renovation, re-new-ation. The market embraced modern technologies and materials, from plastics to aluminum as low-maintenance, time and cost saving improvements over past forms. The features fabricated from those materials were often modern, but traditional forms were always a central component. Revival-themed interiors, rustic or refined, evoked Colonial and Frontier myths.⁵ Manufacturers extruded aluminum and vinyl siding in the shape of wood clapboards. This reliance upon past forms, both high style and vernacular has only grown in recent decades. Today's remodeling projects are distinct, however, in their attempt to ascribe age value to homes that are not that old. Furnishings and painted wood floors are distressed; features and rooms look lived in, not pristine.

Retailers have evolved to accommodate these various nostalgic efforts at

⁵ Such nostalgic practices, according to Grant McCracken, displace ideals to a safer realm where they cannot intrude on daily life. See chapter 7, "The Evocative Power of Things: Consumer Goods and the Preservation of Hopes and Ideals," in Grant McCracken, "Meaning Manufacture and Movement in the World of Goods," in *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990).

instant character. Restoration Hardware and Martha Stewart offer visions of the prosperous and contemporary farm house or Cape Cod fisherman's cottage, populated with curving metal lamps, frosted sconces, and wainscoting.⁶ Design Within Reach promotes a return to mid-century Modernism that is driven by a combination of baby boomer nostalgia for the material culture of their youth and a younger generation's re-discovery and re-infatuation with minimalism.⁷ Additional research into the evolution of remodeling trends between the early 1970s and the present would help us gain a deeper historical context for the contemporary interest in retro remodeling.

The narrow focus of this dissertation on early postwar marketing approaches directed primarily to a white middle-class audience, leaves other related areas open for investigation. As Richard Harris notes, there is also a lack of understanding how race played into the development and practice of home improvement. Did exclusionary activities such as the imposition of restrictive covenants and redlining prompt African-Americans and other marginalized groups to fix up the homes they had as an alternative to moving up? And how did other low-income groups perceive remodeling during this time, those without the means to order new kitchens from catalogs and patronize the new home stores? What was the nature of the work they undertook on their homes during this period and how did it differ from the middle class steeped in a mass culture of new and newly accessible home improvement work?

⁶ See: Susan J. Matt, "Why the Old-Fashioned Is in Fashion in American Houses," in *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture, and Consumers*, ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

⁷ See: Deneen Gilmour, "Nostalgia for Sale: Extending Burke's Theory of Substance to Idealized Images of Home," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 5, no. Fall (2006): 57-52., especially p.63

For those on the other end of the economic spectrum, remodeling has long been a hobby, a way to consume, to change their self-image with a regularity that almost seems required of public figures. This sort of serial, house hopping remodeling is celebrated in popular magazines, and television shows from Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* to MTV's *Cribs*. Often such spaces are marked by a certain sterility and orderliness, they are undisturbed by habitation, by wear, time, and memory. They are enactments of the American concept of self-invention and self-reinvention, a discarding and concealment of the old in an unending quest for the contemporary.

In an essay about his mother's habits of space making, Daniel Harris contrasted those habits with the film and music star Cher, a "frantic drifter" who habitually relocated to new residences, redecorating each time with the assistance of a well-known (but unnamed) California designer. Within months of the newest work being completed, she "inevitably wearies of her expensive new toy and seeks out another source of self-renewal, another environment in which she can recreate herself, experimenting with styles of decor much as other women experiment with shades of eye shadow."⁸ Harris's writing raises another potentially fruitful avenue for future research into issues of change and reinvention—their subversion and rejection as individuals age.

Opportunities also exist to examine further how an increasingly valuable postwar home improvement market shaped relationships among building professions

⁸ Daniel Harris, "My Mother's Living Room," *The Antioch Review* 53, no. 2 (1995): 133-143. The author contrasts Cher's homes and habits with his mother's, which are marked by the clutter and disorder of collected memories.

and between those professions and the public. This period is often characterized as one in which professionals of all sorts triumphed. We encountered numerous examples in the previous chapters—psychologist Joyce Brothers, consumer expert Ernest Dichter, marketing authority Pierre Martineau, housing researcher Glenn Beyer, and the editors of every magazine mentioned who assumed authority to speak on the needs and responsibilities of postwar homeowners.⁹ Yet these assertions seem to clash with competing cultural movement toward consumer autonomy. In some sources, amateur intuition in design and in decisions about allocation and reorganization of family living space seems to trump professional expertise. The move toward self-service retailing, the doing and designing of remodeling work by homeowners, and consumer testimonials all marked the rise of individual authority at the expense of experts and tastemakers.¹⁰

Today there is a culture-wide diminution of authority marked by the suspicion of expert opinion and disdain for intellectual elitism. Internet sites such as Yelp, Trip Advisor, Amazon, and the iTunes Store are structured around consumer reviews. Websites for The Home Depot and other remodeling retailers allow visitors to rate products and post reviews and photos to guide other consumers. The mantra that everyone is a critic has taken on new resonance as popular, individual opinions replace

⁹ Clifford Clark wrote, "Doctors, social workers, sociologists, psychologists, appliance manufacturers, and even the writers of television serials suggested, with varying degrees of authority, new images of what the ideal American family should be like." Clifford E. Clark, *The American Family Home: 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 205.

¹⁰ In 1930 the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset claimed to already see this suspicion of a higher authority in fellow Europeans whom he labeled "mass man." According to Ortega, this type of man "makes no demands on himself, but contents himself with what he is, and is delighted with himself." He "ceases to appeal to other authority and feels himself lord of his own existence." José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932, 1993) 63.

those of professional reviewers and other arbiters of taste. A closer examination of remodeling marketing in the last decades of the twentieth century would illuminate the progression of consumer autonomy from the postwar era to the present.

Historical moments where one upstart industry or product emerges to squeeze others out have often produced a rich historical record describing contested terrain and market share.¹¹ Plumbers and carpenters exhorted do-it-yourselfers to leave larger projects to professionals. Professional painters fought the adoption of amateur-friendly, time-cutting rollers and sprayers.¹² In contrast, the architectural profession was largely silent on the postwar rise of remodeling and do-it-yourself. To some extent the lack of architect interest was not surprising. Professional designers were only involved in a small percentage of residential work, new construction or alteration. They often saw remodeling as a stopgap, last resort source of work during economically lean times when few new construction commissions were available. No doubt it was also partly attributable to the profession's historic prejudice against working with existing building stock instead of designing entirely new structures tabula rasa. Generally speaking, architects have not in the past, and do not at present, become well known by designing additions and alterations to existing buildings.

Yet, designers had often turned to remodeling work during lean economic times when few new construction projects were being commissioned. And there were

¹¹ For example the arrival of gypsum board drywall drew a fierce reaction from the Wood, Wire, and Metal Lathers' International Union as covered in the pages of its journal, *The Lather*. Richard Harris treats the response of the trades to home improvement in: Richard Harris, *Building a Market: The Rise of the Home Improvement Industry, 1914-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 317.

¹² See: "[Painters] Work Restrictions Win [California] Court Approval." *Engineering News-Record* 136 (August 21, 1958): 136. Harris, describes response of trades in, Harris, *Building a Market*, 317.

initial suggestions that architects would become integral to the postwar home improvement market. Articles covering first generation home improvement retail centers promised these outlets would have trained architects onsite assisting consumers and developing new services and packages. The *American Lumberman* envisioned such centers including a "staff architect with assistants in an architectural department. (Potential employment for thousands of qualified architects in this field.)"¹³ Some designers presented themselves as experts in how families lived and should live and experts at creating spaces conducive to harmonious family life. It was what they offered homeowners and homebuyers who were being inundated with plans and spec houses and who were questioning the need for architects at all. Primarily though, retail home improvement stores hired builders and informally-trained draftsmen to plan their work, and remodeling article and book authors called for architect involvement in only the largest projects.¹⁴

Lastly, it would be useful to extend the investigation of remodeling to other locations around the globe focusing on two initial questions, 1) how was home improvement considered and encouraged in other national contexts, and 2) how did the United States government and U.S. corporations attempt to export the concept of

¹³ "The Dealer of Tomorrow," *American Lumberman* (1948): 256-264.

¹⁴ Clifford Clark wrote of these claims: "despite their attempts to make the architect an expert in both house design and family life, professional architects were waging a losing battle to get a bigger share of the vast expansion in single-family housing that began after World War II." Clark, *The American Family Home: 1800-1960*, 204.

Yet professional architects clearly had some clout and were occasionally part of the equation as building product suppliers decided whether or not to redirect their business to consumers. *American Lumberman* suggested that building material retailers feared that architects would no longer take them seriously as suppliers if they diversified and started also selling appliances or sporting goods directly to consumers. When probing why retailers might not want to expand their product lines it asked "Does he fear architects will resent his becoming a general merchandiser?" Lloyd J Weir, "Merchandising and Selling in a Buyers Market," *American Lumberman* (March 27, 1948): 39, 47.

home improvement to other nations. Richard Harris incorporates the Canadian, and to a lesser extent Australian experience into his work.¹⁵ Coverage of home improvement history in other countries, at least in English language publications, is paltry.¹⁶ A comparative study of countries where socialized housing was prevalent and where the home's cultural meanings differed may also reveal interesting new insights into the American experience. Direct government intervention such as the British Government's mandatory standards and the Parker Morris recommendations, ideological considerations in the Soviet Bloc, and varying international labor and professionalization issues would all reconfigure the story of postwar remodeling as it occurred elsewhere. Preliminary investigations suggest that the U.S. Government and business interests partnered to export American-style home improvement during the postwar period. Business exchanges such as the Foreign Buyers Program, trade fairs, brochures, and Voice of America radio programs aimed to increase export of remodeling products and to disseminate American ideological conceptions of the home as bastion of Western individualism.¹⁷

In some ways, this work has attempted to problematize (without dismissing) the expectation that there is always something to be improved, always something better on

¹⁵ Harris, *Building a Market*.

¹⁶ For an example of one of the few studies, see: David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, "Warsaw Interiors: The Public Life of Private Spaces, 1949-1965," in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (New York: Berg, 2002), 181-206.

¹⁷ State Department records from the 1970s describe visits of Japanese business delegations (under Foreign Buyers Program auspices) to the National Hardware Show, the National Housewares Show, and the Home Improvement '76 Congress and Exposition. According to an embassy communiqué, the "participants' reactions toward U.S. hardware, gardening, and other home improvement products were great." See communications between U.S. State Department and the American Embassy in Tokyo, National Archives and Records Administration.

the horizon. Indoor plumbing and electric lighting incontestably improved domestic spaces. New materials that were easier to clean and new spaces that reduced overcrowding could improve quality of life for the home's occupants. But there were innumerable products and projects proposed as home improvements throughout the postwar era, in which the advantages gained were less obvious and more open to debate. The quality of lumber used in postwar improvement projects is invariably poorer in quality and durability than the old-growth timber it usually replaced. Some things simply can't be made any better than they were in the past, whether window sash or pianos.¹⁸

Postwar Americans' widespread acceptance of home improvement as a desirable activity is partially explained by a broader assumption that the country's citizens are (or should be) working toward a shared notion of perfection. As this work reveals, home improvement had embedded within it assumptions that there is a broadly accepted standard for what makes a better house. Despite the rhetoric of individuality and customization that promoters deployed, there were overriding expectations about the form those remodelings should assume.¹⁹ But improvement is always relative. The immigrant's manner of improving their homes (often through the display of furnishings and decorative elements) was very different from the social

¹⁸ For a discussion of virgin vs. second-growth wood, see: Brent Hull, *Historic Millwork: A Guide to Restoring and Re-creating Doors, Windows, and Moldings of the Late Nineteenth Through Mid-twentieth Centuries* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 11-12. Many argue that in terms of material and craftsmanship, the best pianos ever made are at least 100 years old. The wood and the skills simply aren't around today. See: "Piano Quality" <http://blog.nexcerpt.com/2011/09/27/piano-quality/> Accessed October 3, 2011.

¹⁹ Just as aesthetic surgery was used in its early years in the 1880s and 90s to "improve" or make "healthy" the appearance of racial minorities. See: Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 16.

reformers ideas that emphasized the removal of so-called unhygienic furnishings and finishes. Some types of improvements never did provide the financial and energy savings that were promised and used to justify such alterations.

Viewing home interventions as a continuum, the term "home improvement" fails to convey the cyclical nature of these practices, the lurches forward and the retreats backwards. Today, as middle class tastes and living habits continue to evolve, the nature of the typical improvement project evolves along with it. Contemporary improvement projects are likely to include the reversal of past improvement projects—enclosed porches are reopened; carpeting is removed to reveal hardwood floors.

Still, the rhetoric of home improvement worked for those promoters who embraced the term and made use of its assumptions in the postwar era. The arguments of the manufacturers, dealers, home economists, and magazine editors suggested that home improvement was about more than just upgrading wall coverings, finishing basements and applying new siding. These changes were mere vehicles for the more important task of upgrading the cultural, social, and personal constructions that it represented and enclosed. Home improvement, framed by its postwar promoters, was above all about improving the country, the community, the family, and the individual.

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